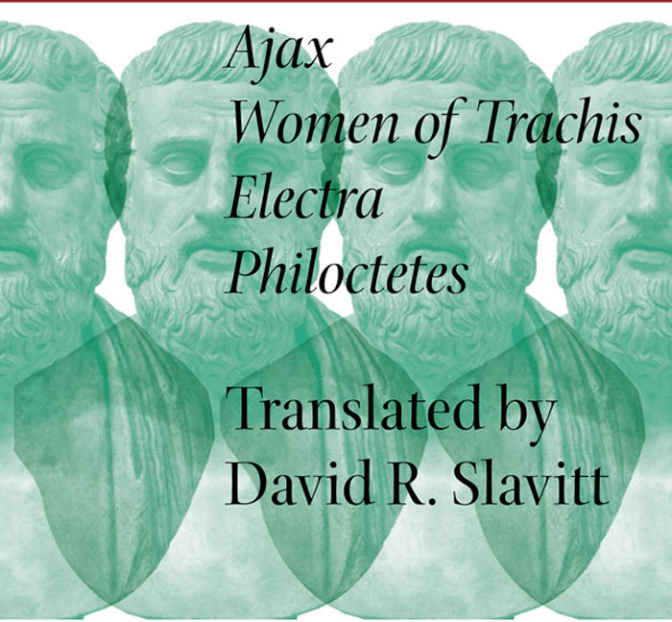
The *Other Four* Plays of Sophocles



Ajax
Women of Trachis
Electra
Philoctetes

Translated by
David R. Slavitt

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For Janet

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Preface

Of the (more or less) 125 plays Sophocles is said to have written over the course of a long and fortunate life, only seven survive. The Theban plays—*Oedipus Rex, Oedipus at Colonus,* and *Antigone*—are the most widely read and most frequently assigned plays in schools and colleges. Without question, they are great pieces of drama. But it is in the four plays presented in this volume that we see Sophocles' experimentation and his daring departures from what Aristotle, taking *Oedipus Rex* as his model, described as the proper pattern of tragedy. In Aristotle's model, the protagonist dies at the end. But in *Philoctetes,* nobody dies. People are dying left and right in *Women of Trachis,* until the end, where Heracles, although about to die, is still alive. In *Ajax,* the hero's death comes after his great soliloquy but in the middle of the play. His corpse is the occasion of the arguments between Teucer and the Atreides, which Odysseus manages to settle. These disputes are about whether Ajax is to be properly buried, a kind of antiphon to the question in *Antigone* about the burial of Polyneices' body, but here there is a resolution without further bloodshed. (*Ajax* is also unique in that the hero kills himself onstage.) Only *Electra* has the conventional shape of tragedy, but within that framework there is the great oddity of the fictional chariot race, from which one might infer that Sophocles' real interest wasn't just in the story—which everyone knew and which Aeschylus had dramatized in *The Libation Bearers*—but also in the place and use of fiction and its effect on the "real" world. Fiction (or falsehood) again presents itself as one of the main issues in *Philoctetes,* where we watch Odysseus teaching Neoptolemus to lie.

These violations of the paradigm ought to be enough to remind us that Sophocles was the playwright, while Aristotle was the philosopher. Philosophers discern rules and categories and make generalizations, while poets find these constraints sometimes helpful, sometimes challenging, and sometimes irksome. Aristotle's

incomplete description of tragedy has become our expectation for the form, which is why we find these plays as unsettling as Greek audiences did when they were produced in the fifth century BCE. For me, this makes Sophocles easier to approach and, at the same time, more complicated and more admirable.

Stylistically, he was more various than I have been able to convey. We have only a few plays by which to know him, but his contemporaries, who had a much wider acquaintance with his dramaturgy, give us tantalizing hints. Dionysius says, for instance, in his *Ancient Writers,* that Sophocles had "sudden lapses into the commonplace." He meant it as a criticism. But when I think of Cavafy, with his great range, and of Auden, and how he could move up or down according to the demands of the dramatic moment, I see that criticism as favorable. I have not attempted to reproduce the changes in timbre, but I have allowed myself to fly high or low as the text seemed to dictate because apparently this was the tragedian's own practice.

Scholars have suggested that there are two distinguishable versions of Sophocles, the younger and the older. The younger Sophocles, thirty to sixty years old, was an aristocrat who embodied Periclean democracy and its hierarchical organization of society. In the face of suffering and death, the heroes of the younger Sophocles' work remain faithful at all costs to an ideal—honor, love, piety, or whatever. The older Sophocles wrote plays in which that dream of Periclean democracy is shaken if not quite gone, and their heroes, while not entirely without some noble characteristics, are creatures of hate and violence. In addition, the gods have changed and show a certain benevolence toward mankind. These include *Ajax, Electra, Philoctetes, Women of Trachis,* and *Oedipus at Colonus* (which doesn't end with a death so much as an apotheosis). These later works have been called the "happy ending" plays and, if they are not blithe, they do have a wary optimism about them that suggests an evolved view of men, fate, and the gods. This emotional and philosophical change is at least as striking as the dramaturgical innovations.

In both areas, they seem to embody the accumulated wisdom of a long and relatively untroubled life.

It was not altogether trouble free, however. According to Cicero, in Sophocles' old age, his sons took him to court to have him declared incompetent—on the ground that he was spending all his time writing plays and not enough paying attention to business affairs. At the trial, their father read an ode from *Oedipus at Colonus* to the jury and then, with applause and shouts of approval, he was led from the court in a triumph both dramatic and legal.

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The Other Four Plays of Sophocles

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Ajax

Characters:

ATHENA

ODYSSEUS

AJAX

CHORUS OF SAILORS FROM SALAMIS

TECMESSA (concubine and prize of war of Ajax)

MESSENGER

TEUCER (half-brother to Ajax)

MENELAUS

AGAMEMNON

Mute Characters:

EURYSACES (son of Ajax and Tecmessa)

SLAVE

HERALD

Scene One

(*Before the tent of Ajax—a considerable structure with a main door and a second smaller door on the side. As the play begins, we see the goddess Athena on a high platform, watching as Odysseus enters and moves across the stage and toward the tent entrance.*)

ATHENA
I've got my eye on you, Odysseus. Always.
I watch you prowl about trying to snatch
any small advantage over your rivals
and enemies. Here you are, at Ajax's tent
all the way at the end down near the ships.
You're following him, trying to figure out
whether he's inside. You're like a hound
tracking a scent. And yes, he's there. You've found him.
His face dripping sweat and his sword, blood.
So your hunt is over. You've found your quarry. But tell me,
what are you trying to learn? I can inform you.

ODYSSEUS
Athena? I cannot see you, but your voice
is loud and clear in my mind, a bugle call.
And you are right. As always. It's Ajax I'm after,
the shield-bearer, my mortal enemy now
I shadow, watching what he does.
Last night it was an act of utter horror. . . .
We think he's the one and want to know for certain,
doing the best we can on a sea of guesses,
and I'm the one who's trying to take our bearings.
What we do know is that our flocks and herds
have been attacked by some maniac butcher,
and their guards were slaughtered with them. Everyone thinks
Ajax had to have done it. One man saw him

running through the meadow, wielding a sword
glistening gore. This he reported to me
and since then I've been following Ajax's tracks
tracing the bloody footprints. Some are his,
but lots of feet have trodden the earth here.
You come at the right moment, just when I need you.
So many times, you have helped me before
and now I turn to you again for aid.

ATHENA
I knew you needed me. I have been watching,
helping you and hinting as you hunted.

ODYSSEUS
Tell me then, my lady, am I right?

ATHENA
Yes. It was he who did these ugly things.

ODYSSEUS
Whatever for? Why such a senseless act?

ATHENA
He is angry about Achilles' armor. He thinks
the jury should have awarded it to him.

ODYSSEUS
I know. But what's the connection with sheep and cows?

ATHENA
He thought it was Argive blood that he was shedding.

ODYSSEUS
The Greek army? He wanted to kill *us*?

ATHENA
And would have, if I hadn't prevented him.

ODYSSEUS
What a mad idea! How could he dare?

ATHENA
Alone,
he set out at night. Creeping along in secret.

ODYSSEUS
How close did he come?

ATHENA
He reached the encampments
of the sons of Atreus, your co-commanders.

ODYSSEUS
What stopped him? What held back his arm?

ATHENA
I did. I confused him, turning his eyes
away from the camp of the army to the fields
where the flocks and herds were sleeping or chewing their cud.
He mistook horned beasts for Greeks and, enraged,
hacked them to death, cleaving their spines. This one
was Agamemnon, that one was Menelaus,
and others were the other chiefs he despised.
I urged him on as he set upon them in madness,
slaughtering here and there. When he was exhausted
he tied some up as captives and brought them here
to his tent, as if they were men whom he could torture.
He's doing that now. It is a hideous scene.
You'll see and you can report what you have witnessed

to all the Argives. But stay and observe for yourself.
Don't worry. He won't be able to see you.
(*to Ajax*)
You, inside, with the bound prisoners. You,
Ajax! I am calling. Come out of your tent.

ODYSSEUS
No! What are you doing? Leave him inside.

ATHENA
Be quiet. Do you want to look like a coward?

ODYSSEUS
Never mind that. I beg you! Let him stay there.

ATHENA
What can happen? Remember, he's just a man.

ODYSSEUS
An enemy, implacable. Was and is.

ATHENA
Then won't you love laughing at him in disgrace?

ODYSSEUS
That is a pleasure I'd as soon forgo.

ATHENA
You're afraid of him just because he is crazy?

ODYSSEUS
I wouldn't need to keep clear of him if he were sane.

ATHENA
Believe me, he won't even see you.

ODYSSEUS
But his eyes
still work well enough, don't they?

ATHENA
He can see,
but I shall keep him in darkness, nevertheless.

ODYSSEUS
If a god wants it, anything can happen.

ATHENA
Then stand still and be quiet.

ODYSSEUS
Very well,
but I should much prefer to be somewhere else.

ATHENA (*to Ajax*)
You, in there. Ajax! This is the second
time I've called you. Do you ignore an ally?

(*Ajax enters from the central door of the tent.*)

AJAX
Xaire! Hail Athena, daughter of Zeus!
Yes, you have stood by me. I am grateful.
In your honor I shall sacrifice from my booty.

ATHENA
I thank you for that. Is your sword now stained with the blood
of many fighters of the Argive camp?

AJAX
I'm proud to say that it is.

ATHENA
Did you manage to strike
the sons of Atreus?

AJAX
Yes. Never again
will those two cast their votes to deny me honor.

ATHENA
Are you telling me they are dead?

AJAX
As they deserved—
for depriving me of the armor I deserved.

ATHENA
And what about Odysseus? Did you get him?

AJAX
Are you asking where he is, that sly old fox?

ATHENA
Yes, Laertes' son. Is he dead, too?

AJAX
No, it's better than that. He is here, inside,
the most welcome of captives. I want him alive . . .

ATHENA
Why? What can you possibly want of him?

AJAX
He is tied to the tent pole and at my mercy—
except that I don't have any.

ATHENA
You mean
you're torturing him!

AJAX
He's bloody now from the whip,
and more eager for his death than I am.

ATHENA
An awful and distasteful business.

AJAX
My lady,
I honor you in all things except this.
You cannot dissuade me. I shall make him suffer.

ATHENA
It's up to you. Do what is in your power.
Go ahead. Don't hold yourself back.

AJAX
I'll get to work then. And, Lady Athena,
I thank you. Stand by me always, as you have done.

(*Ajax returns to the tent.*)

ATHENA
Do you see, Odysseus, how great is the gods' power?
Who had a clearer mind? Who was a better
fighter—always ready and able—than Ajax?

ODYSSEUS
No one. He is my enemy, but still
I pity him, seeing him so afflicted
and unaware of himself and his sorry fate.
He, I, and all of us are ghosts,
and looking at him I am struck by the gloomy idea
that all of us are mere shadows of shadows.

ATHENA
Remember what you have witnessed. Never speak
a vain or arrogant word against the gods.
Are you strong? Wealthy? Do not delude yourself
that these are reliable things. They disappear.
In a single day a man can be raised up
or dashed down. The gods are kind to those
who never forget themselves or put on airs.

(*Athena exits, upward if possible. Odysseus also exits. The Chorus of Ajax's sailors enters.*)

FIRST CHORISTER
Son of Telamon, Lord of Salamis,
that sea-washed pedestal of greatness,
when you prosper, I rejoice.

SECOND CHORISTER
But when Zeus assails you
or the rumors of wicked tongues
come from Danaans,

then I am fearful,
defenseless as a dove.

FIRST CHORISTER
During the night that has passed, we heard
reports that tend to your discredit,
that you destroyed the grazing horses,
the Danaan's booty won in war.
All these beasts, not yet allotted,
taken by spear, you killed with a sword.

SECOND CHORISTER
Such are the whispered words from Odysseus
into the eager ears of all.
Every man takes pleasure spreading
tales of the troubles of great men.
Envy authenticates any wild story.
Against us, no one would speak
for there would be no satisfaction
he could take. But you, being great,
are unsafe from the swarm of gnats.

FIRST CHORISTER
There is a bond between us,
for lesser men depend on the strong,
as they require support in turn
and devotion from their followers, too.
But we cannot silence the clamor
we have heard from petty people.

SECOND CHORISTER
Behind your back, they chatter like birds,
but would take fright if in the sky

a great raptor appeared and threatened.
Then they would cower in sudden silence.

FIRST CHORISTER
Can it be wild Artemis,
breeder of bulls, daughter of Zeus?
Is she the parent of our disgrace?
Was it her anger for victory tribute
we failed to provide from the booty of arms,
or payment for some slain stag
that moved Ajax against the flocks?

SECOND CHORISTER
Or was it Ares, armed in bronze?
Did our lord somehow slight him,
failing to thank him after some exploit?
Did he come in spite in the night?

FIRST CHORISTER
Son of Telamon, you were made
mad and set on the flocks. Sane,
you never would have done such things.
Some angry god afflicted you.

SECOND CHORISTER
But yet may Zeus and Phoebus Apollo
fend off the winds of rumor that swirl,
even if the two great kings
and Odysseus, too, Sisyphus' bastard,
spread their invidious lies about you.

FIRST CHORISTER
Emerge from your tent by the sea, O lord.
Do not sit silent while calumny calls.
Hurl their lies back in their faces.

FIRST CHORISTER
Rise up from the seat where you have been
resting as in a pause in battle.
The fires of ruin leap to high heaven.
Your enemies' insolence blows in the wind
and their vipers' tongues flutter with falsehoods.

SECOND CHORISTER
It is grievous to hear, painful to contemplate.

(*Enter Tecmessa, from the tent.*)

TECMESSA
Shipmates and friends of Ajax,
we have great cause for grief.
The mighty Ajax, hard, harsh,
is laid low, stricken, undone.
The lord of the house of Telamon
muddled by madness.

FIRST CHORISTER
What has happened? What decline
in fate and fortune has come upon him?
What has the night done to him? You,
his spear-won consort, the one he chose,
the one he embraces and loves, you know.
Let us share your knowledge and grief.

TECMESSA
My tale is beyond telling—disaster
worse than death, horrid, heartbreaking.
Overcome by his madness, Ajax
suffered and acted out delusions,
sacrificed or slaughtered in frenzy
dumb beasts, dumbfounding us all.
Within the tent, fouled with offal,
you'll see the shambles he has made,
ruined as he is ruined himself.

FIRST CHORISTER
Those rumors the vile Danaans are spreading
you now confirm and say are true?
How can we bear to hear such things?
But how can we now contrive an escape?

SECOND CHORISTER
What will become of us? What must he
face in the future, deranged and defenseless?
That sharp sword of his is bloodied
by sheep and cows, horses, and herdsmen.

TECMESSA
He brought home those bound beasts
and some he slew on the tent floor,
cleanly slashing a stretched throat,
but others he tore apart, hacking,
hateful, and cruel, at the sides of the rib cage.
Two white-footed rams he took,
cut one's head off and tore out its tongue,
and the other he tied to a tent post, upright,
lashed it there and whipped it to death
cursing it all the while in fury

as if the beast were a man and he
himself were an avenging demon.

FIRST CHORISTER
Now is the time to hide my head
under my hood and scurry away.

SECOND CHORISTER
Or seat myself on my rower's bench
and haul for dear life to gain seaway.

FIRST CHORISTER
The sons of Atreus come against us
spitting out their frightening threats.

SECOND CHORISTER
They will come soon and hurl harder
missiles to stone the man to death.

FIRST CHORISTER
I have always stood by Ajax
but fear to stand too close to him now.

TECMESSA
Now he has a reason for greater grief:
his fury, like a summer storm
blown away by a south wind,
has passed and the skies are clear. His mind
is lucid. He looks about in dismay
and stares at what his hands have done—
after his agony, this new agony.

FIRST CHORISTER
But the madness has ceased? A good thing!
Now his fortunes may improve.
The troubles behind him must matter less.

TECMESSA
If you had the choice would you endure
pain alone or have your friends
in pain, too, suffering with you?

SECOND CHORISTER
Sorrows doubled are even worse.

TECMESSA
He is no longer sick. It is we
who are afflicted now with him.

FIRST CHORISTER
I don't understand what you are saying.

TECMESSA
When he was mad, he was not unhappy.
In his delusion, he exulted
in what he was doing. Whatever possessed him
gave him a kind of joy, while we
suffered to see him, and mourned his ruin.
Now that he is sane, recovered,
he is also pained and ashamed,
while we suffer no less than before.
The sorrow, the pity, therefore, are doubled.

SECOND CHORISTER
I see what you mean and I agree, but still
I fear that a blow from some god must have struck him,

for if his wits have returned, we should suppose
that he would be happier now than he was then.

TECMESSA
Life has its paradoxes. Accept them.

FIRST CHORISTER
Tell us how it began. We share
your anguish. Let us know what happened.

TECMESSA
You are right. You are in this with him and deserve
to know how, in the dead of night, when the lamps
had long gone out, he took his two-edged sword
and made as if to leave. I asked him where
he was going and for what. No message had come;
no trumpet had sounded. Why go out unbidden?
The army is all asleep. His answer to me
was curt: "Silence is beautiful in a woman."
What reply could I make to that? He left
alone, and what happened out there, I can only
guess. When he came back he brought bulls with him,
and herdsmen's dogs, and a great number of sheep.
Then he began to butcher them, or worse,
for butchers are kind compared to him. He cut
some heads off, but that wasn't enough. He tied them
and tortured them to death. He emerged from the tent
to shout the names of the two sons of Atreus
and that of Odysseus too, and laugh at the violence
he had done. But when he returned to the tent
the madness seemed to pass. It took him a while,
but he gazed about the charnel house he had made
and slowly he came back to his saddened senses.
He struck his head with his palm, fell to the floor

among the carcasses of beasts, and cried
aloud and in shame and rage tore out his hair
in fistfuls. Then he turned to me and asked
what had happened, what dreadful thing
had he just done. If I did not tell him the truth
he threatened me and said that I would be next.
I was afraid and told him what had happened,
and as he heard he wailed in lamentation
in a way I had never heard him do before.
He'd always said that for a man to weep
was cowardly and showed a lack of spirit—
but he was weeping, not in the high-pitched keening
you hear from women. He was a bellowing bull
with deep and desperate groans.
He has fallen silent.
Now he sits in the midst of this catastrophic
carnage. He does not eat or drink but he plans
some further evil. I know it. He speaks in broken
phrases, but their gloomy intention is clear.
Dear friends, this is why I come to you. Go in.
Help him if you can. Men who are grieving
can sometimes take some comfort from their friends.

FIRST CHORISTER
Oh, Tecmessa, daughter of Teleutas.
What you tell us is hard to hear.
(*From within the tent comes the voice of Ajax*)
Aieeeeeee . . .

TECMESSA
You hear that cry of Ajax? He gets worse.
(*voice of Ajax*)
Aaaaaaaaahhhhhh . . .

SECOND CHORISTER
Either he is sick now
or what he did makes him sick.
(*voice of Ajax*)
Aaaaaaaahhhhh! My son, my son!

TECMESSA
This is alarming. He calls for our son,
Eurysaces. Does he intend to hurt him?
Where is Eurysaces? I am lost.
(*voice of Ajax*)
Teucer, my brother! Where are you?
Will you continue raiding while I die here?

FIRST CHORISTER
That seems sane. But open the door.
Perhaps seeing us will sober him.

TECMESSA
I will. You can see with your own eyes
what he has done and what has become of him.

(*The door of the tent is opened and Ajax is revealed among the slaughtered animals. For a while, the Chorus stares at him in dismay while he stares back with a distracted smile. Then, with a gesture of welcome, he speaks.*)

AJAX
Greetings, shipmates. You are the only ones
who have been loyal, no matter how adverse
the tides or how high the breaking waves.
You put all your heart's strength into the oars.

SECOND CHORISTER (*to Tecmessa*)
What you have told us turns out to be
all too true. Or it's worse than you said.
Clearly he's not in his right mind.

AJAX
Brave sailors! And loyal. The only ones
who haven't abandoned ship. Good men, good men.
Help me once more, my mates. Kill me now,
and put an end to my unbearable pain.

FIRST CHORISTER
Don't say that. Or even think it.
Evil is no way to deal with evil.
The pain of the cure should not exceed
the agony of the ailment itself.

AJAX
But look at me. I am Ajax, strong and brave,
who never trembled on bloody battlefields.
Look at my mighty deeds among these beasts,
that never menaced anyone. What had they done?
What have I done? I suffer more than they do! (*Laughs*)

TECMESSA
Lord Ajax! Do not speak of it, I beg you.

AJAX
Out of my sight, woman. Leave me alone.

TECMESSA
Listen to me. Be sensible. You'll get through this.

AJAX
How? Look at my wretchedness? Those men,
those wicked men from Troy who escaped me! Instead
I shed the blood of docile sheep and oxen.

FIRST CHORISTER
What's done cannot be undone. Things are
as they are, and we must find some way to accept them.

AJAX
That trickster, Laertes' devious, wicked son,
bothers me still, laughing at my distress.
He cannot contain himself: Odysseus is happy
whenever he can see that Ajax suffers.

SECOND CHORISTER
That is in the hands of the gods—
to laugh, weep, or endure as we can.

AJAX
What doesn't he know? He laughs at me,
that filthy fellow. He dances in his delight,
Laertes' lout son, insidious, evil.

FIRST CHORISTER
To laugh or rage is the gods' gift.

AJAX
Even in my ruin, I want to confront him.
Oh my, oh me, oh, no. No, no.

SECOND CHORISTER
Do you want him to see you like this?

AJAX
Oh, Zeus! Ancestor of my ancestors, hear me!
Let me destroy him. Let me see him die
and those brother kings with him. Let me accomplish
this and then, content, I can die myself.

TECMESSA
If you pray for your death, then pray for mine as well.
What reason have I to live if you are gone?

AJAX
Darkness, you are my light now. In gloom's heart
I look to dwell. I recoil from the world of the gods
and mortal men. The determined daughter of Zeus
torments me and from her there is no escape.
Where can I hide? All my great deeds are shrunk
to the shame of these slaughtered animals.
My madness mocks my life. Where is the army?
Let them find me and grasp their sharp swords
to strike me dead.

TECMESSA
How pained I am to hear such sorry words
from such a man whom the world admired as brave.

AJAX
Relentless waves of the sea,
farewell to you all,
and you spits of rock and caves
that have held me here
year after weary year,
I take my leave of you all,
for I shall no longer draw a hated breath

of your inimical air.
Your waters, Scamander, that flowed
as if to wash away the Argive host
shall be quit of me and of all
the Argives who came here,
to Troy's great cost.
That you had never seen our like
was no empty boast.
I say this, I
who in my agony lie
with all my honor lost.

FIRST CHORISTER
I cannot restrain you. But I know it is wrong
for you to rail this way, even with all
the unspeakable woes that you have endured.

AJAX
Aias! Whoever thought my name would sound
like a cry of pain and sorrow? But I say again
Aias! My father won glory here,
and I have come with no less a force
to perform such deeds as equal his, but see
how I perish here, dishonored by my peers.
I know this in my bones, and I say to you
if Achilles himself were alive to award his armor,
I would be the one to whom he would give it,
his brother in arms. Those other brothers, the sons
of Atreus, have made the award to that vile
trickster, that conniver. How can I bear it?
Had my mind not swerved into madness, my goal
would have been the destruction of Agamemnon
and Menelaus. They made the award.
And artful Odysseus accepted, having connived it.

But cold-eyed Athena undid my mind
just as I was about to stretch out my hand
against those villains. Instead, I slaughtered beasts
while those I hated eluded me and laugh
even now. Is any of this my fault?
When the gods intervene, the wicked man may escape
even from him who is braver, stronger, and better.
So what to do? The gods are against me. The Greeks
detest me, and Troy and this wretched plain loathe me.
Should I put to sea and leave them all behind?
But what will my father say when I appear
disgraced and empty-handed, without a prize
for all my efforts here? I cannot bear
the shame of it! How can I free myself
of the nets of circumstance? Appear at their wall
and challenge any Trojan to man-to-man
combat and seek glory until I perish?
This, I fear, would delight Atreus' sons.
There must be another way to show my father
that he did not beget a coward. No,
there is no answer, and life is a drawing out
of shame, day after day, that will not die
but arises fresh each morning. What good is that?
The noble man will not endure it. He lives
with honor or else is honorably dead.
Now you have heard all I have to say.

FIRST CHORISTER
Those words express your frame of mind,
but how can you trust that now? Think!
Let your friends temper your judgment.

TECMESSA

Ajax, my lord, what can be worse for a man
than to give way to necessity's impositions?
My father enjoyed freedom and had more wealth
than any Phrygian, but because of the will of the gods
and your own strength, I am now a slave.
I have shared your bed and wish that you may prosper.
By mighty Zeus and by our sweet, shared bed,
I implore you, do not abandon me, do not
permit your foes to insult me. Do not allow
someone among them to take me for his own.
They shall treat me and our son as slaves
and point to me as Ajax's concubine
who was envied once but now is brought low. Such words,
insulting to me, will be shameful for your people.
Think of your father whom you will be leaving behind
in a bitter old age and your mother who prays to the gods
that you may return safe. And let your heart
feel pity for your son as you think of what harm
must come to him and me, abandoned to strangers.
You are our only protection. You ruined my country,
and Death has taken my parents away to the shades.
You are my country, now, my kin, my safety.
Remember the sweet pleasures we brought each other
for which some kindness should come. Once you let go
of such memories, what is left of a life?

SECOND CHORISTER

Ajax, do you not feel some pity?
We urge you to listen to what she says.

AJAX

No, you have it wrong. She is the one
who should listen to what I say and should obey.

TECMESSA
Dear Ajax! I obey you in every way.

AJAX
Then bring my son here so I can see him.

TECMESSA
The reason I sent him away was that I was afraid.

AJAX
Because of my madness, you mean?

TECMESSA
Yes, I was worried that he might die.

AJAX
That would have been consistent with this horror.

TECMESSA
That was what I was trying to avoid.

AJAX
What you did was right. (*Sudden laugh*) That was good.

TECMESSA
What can I do for you now that the fit has passed?

AJAX
Bring him to me so that I can see him.

TECMESSA
The servants have him. He is not far away.

AJAX
You are keeping me waiting, woman!

TECMESSA (*calling to someone offstage*)
Bring the boy! Whoever has him, bring him!

AJAX
And? Where is he? Or do your words mean nothing?

TECMESSA
He's coming. He's here.

(*An attendant enters with Eurysaces.*)

AJAX
Lift him up so we can see each other!
If he is truly my son, this sight of gore
will not upset him. It cannot be too soon
to begin to teach him the harsh ways of his father.
(*pause*)
Son, may your luck be better than mine has been,
but in all other ways you must try to be like me,
for if you do you will never be a coward!
I envy you your innocence. You cannot
understand these troubles of mine. A life
of ignorance is the only happy life.
Too soon will you learn delight and pain
and then you will be tested and show the world—
your enemies and your friends—what a man you are.
What kind of son, of what kind of a father!
Meanwhile, let the gentle breezes caress you
just as your mother does in your tender life
that delights your mother here. No Greek I know
shall insult you, even after I am gone,

for you will have my brother Teucer to guard you.
(*to the Chorus*)
And to you, seafaring fighters, I give my thanks
and charge you to convey my command to Teucer
that he bring this lad home and show him off
to Telamon and my mother for whom he will care
in their old age. Let my arms not be awarded
by some committee, or by him who ruined me,
but let my son be given the well-made shield,
strong as its seven hides and never broken,
from which he takes his name. The rest bury
with me in my grave.
Take the boy away,
and let there be no weeping in our camp
as women are prone to do. No lamentations.
Physicians know that when surgery is required
the time for incantations has long passed.

FIRST CHORISTER
Your words are fearsome, but even more do I fear
the sharp edge of decisiveness on your tongue.

TECMESSA
Lord Ajax, what are you planning to do?

AJAX
Be quiet woman. Have you no sense at all?

TECMESSA
I am in despair. I beg you, for your son's sake,
and for mine, and that of the gods, do not leave us!

AJAX
You prattle nonsense. Do you not understand
that I now owe the gods nothing at all?

TECMESSA
Do not say such words of terrible omen.

AJAX
You waste your breath, woman, and my time.

TECMESSA
Will you not listen to me?

AJAX
You have already said too much.

TECMESSA
I am afraid, my lord.

AJAX
Close the doors. Do it.

TECMESSA
Please! Don't do this.

AJAX
You must be a fool to try to change me now.

(*Servant exits with Eurysaces. Tecmessa remains.*)

FIRST CHORISTER
Salamis, our famous home,
lies lapped by the blue sea
and blessed by the gods.

But I have been bivouacked here
on Ida's foreign meadows,
ground down by time
that is Hades' friend.

SECOND CHORISTER
Our companion, Ajax,
is driven mad by the gods.
Valiant once and strong, he sallied forth
but now his struggles are inward with wild thoughts.
He lives, and yet we mourn him.
His great deeds have won him nothing.
The sons of Atreus he took as friends,
incapable of friendship, have let him drop.

THIRD CHORISTER
When his white-haired mother learns of his sickness
the world will hear her sorrowing cries
echoing those of the piteous nightingale.
Her fists will thud as she beats them upon her breast.

FIRST CHORISTER
Who can say if Hades is not better
than the hopelessness of this kind of sickness?
The noblest of all the Achaeans
stood proud once but now he totters.
His father does not yet know of the grief
that lies before him in life's path.
Of all the Greeks, there is none like Ajax
with a fate no mortal man can bear.

AJAX
From darkness measureless time brings forth all things
for darkness to repossess. Nothing endures;

no solemn oath or steadfast purpose can last
but time must overwhelm it. My heart was hard
as any tempered iron but all my words
this woman's tears have softened. I feel pity
leaving her a widow among my foes
and my son a defenseless orphan. Nevertheless
I shall go to the shore to wash this dirt away
and try to escape the spite of the bright-eyed goddess.
I shall search out some patch of untrodden ground
in which to plant the hilt of this sword of mine
where no one can see it. Let the shades below
keep watch for me over what was Hector's gift.
Since then, my Argive friends have treated me badly,
which proves the old saying—that enemies' gifts
have strings attached. I have learned my lesson
and know what to do: I must bow my head
to Atreus' sons. Whatever in nature has power
bows down before the winter's frigid winds
until the summer comes. Night's black domain
has to give way before Dawn's blazing horses.
The winds that lash the foaming sea subside
and Sleep commutes the sentence of those who suffer.
How then do I conduct my life, knowing
that everything is provisional? You hate
an enemy but know how circumstances
can change to make him your friend. Your hand reaches out
to a trusted friend to help him, but cautiously,
for he may not remain your friend forever.
One's loves and hottest hatreds cool to indifference
and we learn to trust nothing but change and decay.
But this will turn out as I want it to. Tecmessa,
go inside and pray to our household gods
that what my heart longs for may be accomplished.
(*Tecmessa exits.*)

And you, my dear comrades, honor my wishes
just as she does. When Teucer arrives, tell him
to care for you and be loyal as you were to me.
I must go where I have to go. You may
in time understand that I seem unfortunate now,
but have carried on and still am what I am.

(*Exit Ajax.*)

FIRST CHORISTER
Leap high in joy,
and all hail in welcome the great Pan,
the gods' dance master.
He wanders the wide sea
and the mountains' high ridges.

SECOND CHORISTER
And hail, too, to Apollo,
great lord of Delos,
come to us from the sea
to join in our dance.

THIRD CHORISTER
Zeus has cleared my eyes of grief
and again the bright light shines
on the black ships that knife through the waves,
for Ajax forgets his pains.

FIRST CHORISTER
He has carried out the gods' commands
and has paid them their proper reverence.

SECOND CHORISTER
Irresistible time decays all things;
we must not seem to be surprised.

THIRD CHORISTER
Ajax is himself again.
He has repented of all that anger
he bore against Atreus' sons.

(*Enter Messenger*.)

MESSENGER
Dear comrades, I report that, first of all,
Teucer is here, back from the Mysian hills.
When he arrived at camp, he was reviled
by all the Argives. They swarmed around him with taunts
and called him "that madman's brother," and they jeered,
shouting that they could not be satisfied
until Ajax was dead, stoned to death.
Swords were drawn, and there would have been bloodshed
if the elders had not intervened to prevent it.
Where is Ajax? I must tell him what happened
in order that he may decide what he wants to do.

FIRST CHORISTER
He's gone off somewhere. His wits are restored
and we suppose that he is now making plans.

MESSENGER
Alas. I was sent too late. Or came too slowly.

SECOND CHORISTER
Why? What do you mean? Too late for what?

MESSENGER
The second thing was that you must not allow Ajax
to leave his tent until Teucer arrives.

THIRD CHORISTER
But why? He is himself again. He appears
in a better mood and reconciled with the gods.

MESSENGER
That isn't what Calchas has prophesized to us.

FIRST CHORISTER
Whatever he said, we haven't heard about it.

MESSENGER
I was there. Calchas removed himself
from where Agamemnon and Menelaus were standing
and in friendliness he took Teucer's hands
and warned him not to let Ajax leave his tent
if he wishes to see his brother alive again.
He said that Athena's anger against him would rage
today but then end. When men rise up
too high, the gods, displeased, will bring them down
in terrible misfortune. Men know this
but we forget and then the gods remind us.
When Ajax left his father, Telamon told him,
"Always wish for victory in battle,
but victory by the grace of the high gods."
And Ajax boasted—stupidly it seems—
"Anyone with the help of the gods can triumph,
even if he amounts to nothing at all,
but I can win on my own, without their help."
This was the dangerous boast Ajax repeated

here on the battlefield. Athena appeared
and urged him on, but he as much as dismissed her,
telling her to help the other Argives
and that where he stood no Trojans would break through.
This, as Calchas explained, was what displeased her—
his more than mortal pride. His vanity.
Still, if he is able to get through today
we may with the gods' help preserve his life.
This is what Calchas said, and Teucer dispatched me
to keep Ajax from leaving his tent. I come
too late, and if Calchas is a prophet,
then it must follow that Ajax is no more.

FIRST CHORISTER (*calling*)
Tecmessa! Come out.
(*speaking to the messengers and other choristers*)
Unhappiest of women,
and daughter of misfortune. Grief's razor cuts.

(*Tecmessa enters with Eurysaces.*)

TECMESSA
I was asleep, the only remission I get
from sorrow and pain. Why do you call me out?

SECOND CHORISTER
This man brings news of Ajax that you should hear
at once, and I am afraid it is not good.

TECMESSA
What news? Tell me!

MESSENGER
Not news, strictly speaking, except to say
that if he has left his tent I fear for him.

TECMESSA
He has gone out. But how is that bad news?

MESSENGER
Teucer ordered that he be kept inside
in the tent's safety and not allowed outside.

TECMESSA
But where is Teucer, and why does he order this?

MESSENGER
He's back. He thinks that this seals Ajax's fate.

TECMESSA
Omoi! Why would he think such a terrible thing?

MESSENGER
It was Calchas the prophet who said this was the day
that would mean either life or death for Ajax.

TECMESSA
Omoi! Guard me, my friends, from the fate that threatens!
Let someone go to Teucer to hurry his coming
and others must go along the shore in search
of unfortunate Ajax! He took himself away,
deceiving me, forgetting me and our son.
What shall we do now? I dare not think. . . .
I too will go as far as I can.
But let us make haste and hope to find him in time.

FIRST CHORISTER
I am ready. We will go this way.

SECOND CHORISTER
And we will search for Ajax. Hurry, men.

(*The Chorus divides into two groups of whatever size. One leaves stage left and the other goes off stage right, with Tecmessa and the child.*)

Scene Two

(*The seashore. Ajax enters with a sword that he plants in the ground hilt downward. This is just out of sight of the audience. Or, if the production is using a retractable sword he can fall on, it can be in full view.*)

AJAX

There it stands. The gift of my hated friend,
which has a rightness to it: Hector would smile.
It is stuck in the sandy soil of Troy, inviting.
Or anyway waiting. Sharp as when it was forged.
I worked on it with my whetstone, honing the edge
to a keenness of which both Hector and I approve.
It is as firmly fixed as I am, ready
to show its loyalty to both its masters
and give me a speedy death.

Zeus, father to Aeacus, grandsire
to Telamon, and therefore my great-grandsire,
I ask you a trifling favor. If you will,
let a messenger go to Teucer and let him
be first to put his hands on my bloodied corpse.
Better him than the dogs and carrion birds,
or one of my former friends whom I now hate.
And of Hermes, who escorts us mortals below,
I ask that he spare me any protracted writhing.
Like a gentle parent, lull me fast to sleep,
once I have impaled myself on this blade.

And you, the dreaded sisters who see our pain,
witness my destruction here at the hands
of Atreus' wretched sons and pay them back
pang for pang, with evil to match their evil.
Pour down your wrath. What they have seen here
of my suicide, let them at their deaths

that I trust will be in agony remember.
Erinyes, who are swift and sure in vengeance,
spare none of the whole host of Achaeans.
And you, bright Sun, as your car traverses heaven,
when you reach Salamis, check your splendid steeds
to announce my fate to my father and my poor mother
who held me in her arms, and hear her wails
resounding across the island and piercing the sky.
But I waste time and ought to get to business.
I must greet Death. I bid farewell to the light
that I remember dawning on Salamis' shores.
And I take my leave, too, of Athens' glory.
And you, the hills and rivers of Troy by which
I have been nourished all these years, farewell.
These are the last words I shall utter here.
The rest, if there be any rest, will be in Hades.

(*Ajax falls on his sword, groans, and then is silent. The Chorus enters, half from one side of the stage, and the other from the other.*)

FIRST CHORISTER
There's no end to this beach.
It goes on forever, and so does our search.
Where haven't I been? Where am I now?
What kind of place would he have been looking for?
But I'm sure I heard a noise. Is someone there?

SECOND CHORISTER
Yes, your shipmate!

FIRST CHORISTER
Any news?

SECOND CHORISTER
We've looked everywhere west of the ships.

FIRST CHORISTER
And you've found nothing?

SECOND CHORISTER
Sand. Sea grass. Muck. No sign of a man.

FIRST CHORISTER
And no one has come by on the eastern road.

SECOND CHORISTER
We need help. A fisherman, maybe. A sea nymph.
Or one of those river nymphs. They get around,
and maybe one of them saw something.

FIRST CHORISTER
No such luck, so far.
(*The offstage voice of Tecmessa*)
Omoi! Aaah!

(*Enter Tecmessa.*)

SECOND CHORISTER
I see the unhappy prize of war, lamenting.

TECMESSA
I am lost, lost. Dear friends, I am undone.

CHORUS (*together, but not in unison*)
What? What is it?

TECMESSA
Ajax is dead, skewered on his sword.

THIRD CHORISTER
Alas! So much for our glorious homecoming!

SECOND CHORISTER
He has killed us as well as himself.

FIRST CHORISTER
Poor lady!

TECMESSA
Poor Ajax! We can only lament.

THIRD CHORISTER
By whose hand was the unhappy man dispatched?

TECMESSA
His own, clearly. He planted the hilt in the ground
and fell upon the blade.

FIRST CHORISTER
Oh, my!

SECOND CHORISTER
Bathed in blood and none of us could protect him!
We were deaf and blind!

THIRD CHORISTER
We were lax in our duty!

FIRST CHORISTER
Where is his body? Is he far from here?

TECMESSA
He must not be looked on. I shall use his cloak
to cover him up. No friend could bear to see him
with the blood that poured from the wound as well as his mouth
and even came out of his nostrils. A terrible sight!
But how can I do this alone? Which friend can help me?
Where is Teucer? His coming now would be timely,
for he could help tend to his brother's body.
Oh, Ajax, Ajax! Unhappy man.
Even his enemies now I think would lament.

FIRST CHORISTER
Obdurate man, you could not help yourself
but were bound by an evil fate to infinite troubles.
Your words of hate for Atreus' sons resounded
day and night and these disasters followed—
when they declared Achilles' armor a prize
for the mightiest Greek remaining. An elaborate insult!

TECMESSA
Omoi! Moi!

SECOND CHORISTER
The anguish of nobility pierces the heart!

TECMESSA
Omoi! Moi!

THIRD CHORISTER
It is not surprising lady that you cry out,
having been robbed this way of such a man.

TECMESSA
You can perhaps imagine, but I feel it.

CHORUS (*together but not in unison*)
Yes, yes. I agree.

TECMESSA
And my son! What will become of him? What yoke
of slavery awaits in a world of masters?

THIRD CHORISTER
You refer, I fear, to the cruel Atreides.
Perhaps some god may intervene to prevent it.

TECMESSA
You see what the gods have done to us already.

FIRST CHORISTER
I must agree. The weight of our burden is great.

TECMESSA
It's Athena, the dread goddess, Odysseus' friend.

THIRD CHORISTER
I am sure the wily man in his dark mind
is delighted and laughs aloud at all our sorrows—
as Agamemnon and Menelaus will laugh.

TECMESSA
Let them! Let them all rejoice at his sorrows.
They showed him no respect when he was alive
but now they will miss him out on the battlefield
where they will need him and will learn his worth.
Wicked and stupid men do not understand
what treasure they hold in their hands until it is gone.
For me, what is sweet to them is unbearably bitter.
But to Ajax it was exactly what he wanted.

His enemies cannot exult, for it was the gods—
not they—who brought him down. And that's the truth,
whatever Odysseus' twisted mind may imagine.
(*From offstage, the voice of Teucer*)
Omoi! Omoi!

SECOND CHORISTER
Quiet. I am sure I heard a voice,
Teucer's, crying out in his pain.

(*Enter Teucer.*)

TEUCER
Oh, Ajax! Oh, dear brother! Is it true?
Is the news I've heard only a terrible rumor?

FIRST CHORISTER
No. He's dead. The report was true, alas.

TEUCER
Alas for my grievous fate!

SECOND CHORISTER
We grieve as well.

TEUCER
Oh, wretchedness!

THIRD CHORISTER
Yes, terrible, terrible.

TEUCER
Poor man! But what of his young son?
Do you know where he is?

FIRST CHORISTER

Alone, by Ajax's tent.

TEUCER

Bring him here at once. We must be careful
lest one of his enemies seize the boy.
He is like a defenseless lion cub
whose mother has somehow been robbed of her mate.
Hurry. The wicked delight in mocking the dead.

(*Exit Tecmessa*.)

FIRST CHORISTER

Before he died, Ajax asked that you
should care for his child—just as you are doing.

TEUCER

I must look at the body. It will be the worst
sight that ever assaulted my weeping eyes,
as my path here was the worst I ever trod,
each reluctant footstep bringing me closer
to the manner of the death of my dear brother.
A rumor had flown like a dreadful bird of prey
through the Achaean camp that he was dead.
I heard it from far away and felt the shock
that turned to grief and every step I took
closer to him burned like black bile.
Uncover him, so that I may see for myself
the whole horror. Omoi! Omoi! How awful!
And yet it took great courage to do such a thing.
What pain you felt! What pain, lesser but longer,
you leave behind for me in your manner of death.
How can I hold my head up when all men know
I was not there when you needed me and could not

help you in your troubles? I imagine our father,
happy to see me and smiling, but that smile
will freeze when he sees that I am alone and you
have not returned. He will never say it,
but he will be thinking of me, the bastard son
born of his battle prize, the coward, the slacker,
who did not protect his brother. He may wonder
whether this was a manifestation of cunning
so that, with Ajax dead, I might contrive
to inherit the house and the lordship. He is old,
ever more fierce in his years, and is quick to quarrel.
He will brood in silence over these matters
and then erupt, reject me, cast me out,
banish me, and denounce me as a slave.
If that is my future at home, here at Troy
I have many more enemies than friends
and with your death I am left to fend for myself.
How can I pull you back from that gleaming sword point?
Do you see how, in the end, the dead Hector
has triumphed with his accursed weapon's yield?

FIRST CHORISTER
Do not indulge yourself with speechifying
but turn your mind to the body and its interment.
And you must prepare your mind and decide what to say
to an enemy whom I see approaching quickly
no doubt to gloat and delight in our great loss.

TEUCER
Whom do you see on his way from the Greek camp?

FIRST CHORISTER
Menelaus, for whom we fight this war.

TEUCER
Yes, I see him too. He's easy to spot.

(*Enter Menelaus with a herald.*)

MENELAUS
You there, I order you: do not move the body.

TEUCER
What? Why should I listen to such nonsense?

MENELAUS
Because it is my order. From your commander.

TEUCER
What possible reason could you have for this?

MENELAUS
We brought him from Achaea as a friend and ally
but once we got here he was as much a foe
as any of the Phrygians we faced.
He wanted to kill us all, the whole Greek army!
He attacked at night with his spear, an act of treason,
and if the goddess had not clouded his mind
ours would be the corpses sprawled on the ground.
It was our good fortune that he killed sheep and cattle,
but we know what his wicked intention was.
Therefore, he shall remain like this, unburied,
left on the sand for the gulls to feast upon.
That is my decision. When he was alive
he was insubordinate and headstrong
but now his corpse will have to follow our orders.
I understand how you may find this distasteful,
but I have to think of the army's discipline.

Just as the laws of a city have no meaning
if the citizens are not afraid to break
or simply ignore them, so too in an army
the chain of command is vital. Even the mighty
have to respect it or else they must be brought down.
Only those who fear their commanders' anger
can think of themselves as safe. To do as one pleases
is a threat to all and invites a general ruin.
An army without discipline is a mob
of fighting men. There has to be a cost
to insolence of the kind your brother displayed.
He would not obey our orders when he was alive,
but the tables are turned, and he shall do as we say.
For this sensible reason I order that you
make no attempt whatever to bury his body,
for if you do, you, too, will rot on the beach.

SECOND CHORISTER
Whatever your reasons, Menelaus, you cannot
commit such an outrage against the dead!

TEUCER
Never again will I be surprised by wrongdoing
of the ignorant and the basely born, if nobles
can utter such sinful words and commit such crimes.
Let us go back a step or two and review
the logic—or the lack of it—of your reasons.
You say that he came as an ally. Was he not
his own master then? And being so,
why would he take orders from any commander
except himself? You came as the king of Sparta,
not the generalissimo. You could not
admonish him or issue any orders
to him any more than he could have ordered you.

Rule, if you like, over your own subjects
and discipline or rebuke them as you please
with words that here have no weight or effect.
I will bury him, as I have the right to do,
without interference from anyone. My brother
did not come here for the sake of your faithless wife
but because of treaties and sacred oaths that bound him.
You come here as a nobody with a herald,
but that gives you no authority. Your words,
these or any others you may pronounce,
are mere noise that does not deserve my attention.

SECOND CHORISTER
However justified your argument,
these words and your way of saying them seem harsh.

MENELAUS
That's quite a brave speech from a mere archer.

TEUCER
Yes, I'm an archer, but a good one!

MENELAUS
You'd be a real menace with a shield.

TEUCER
Even without one, I could deal with you
with no difficulty.

MENELAUS
Your show of anger
is mere show.

TEUCER

It is not just anger but justice
that gives force to my unassailable words.

MENELAUS

Am I to honor my murderer?

TEUCER

Murderer?
You appear to me to be in excellent health.

MENELAUS

A god kept me safe, but that's what he wanted.

TEUCER

Then honor the gods to whom you owe your thanks.

MENELAUS

What? How do I not honor the gods?

TEUCER

You forbid me to bury my half-brother's body!

MENELAUS

That is what we do with enemies.

TEUCER

Did Ajax ever oppose you as a foe?

MENELAUS

We hated each other, as you very well know.

TEUCER

You cheated him. You rigged the assembly vote.

MENELAUS
That was the judges' decision, not my own.

TEUCER
There were easy chances for fraud—and you took them.

MENELAUS
Those are dangerous charges you are making.

TEUCER
Dangerous, yes, but you are the one imperiled.

MENELAUS
No more talk. The man is not to be buried.

TEUCER
Fine. Enough talk. He shall be buried!

MENELAUS
I have heard a loudmouth before, urging sailors
to defy a storm, but then when it hit the ship
he was silent and huddled under his cloak in fear.
In just that way, the small cloud in the sky
will loom larger as its storm approaches
to shut you up or drown your voice in its howls.

TEUCER
And I have heard a stupid man annoying
his betters in times of trouble. But someone like me
came along to teach the fellow manners
and how to respect the dead. But let me speak plainly.
You are that stupid man, and I am the master
who instructs him in how to avoid great pain.

MENELAUS
I will not listen to this or bandy words
when I can better convince by brute force.

TEUCER
Go, then. Nothing is worse than pretentious nonsense.

(*Exit Menelaus*.)

FIRST CHORISTER
From these kinds of disputes come great struggles.
Teucer, come, hurry, and try to find
some ditch for the man where you can hide him away
covered with earth, a poor and inadequate tomb
but one that mortals shall remember always.

TEUCER
They are coming, the man's son and his wife, too,
to mourn at the tomb of this unfortunate man.

(*Enter Tecmessa, attendant, and Eurysaces.*)

TEUCER (*to Eurysaces*)
Boy, come here. Do not be afraid. Stand close
and take these strands of hair, one from your mother,
one from me, your uncle, and one of your own.
Kneel with these as grave gifts to your father
and ask his spirit to guard you. Pay no attention
if soldiers come to try to drag you away.
The gods will send them a bitter death in exile
without any proper burial. The gods
will destroy their heirs as such evil deserves,
cutting them off as I cut off these hairs.
Let no one move you. Kneel and hold on tight.

And you, men, do not stand here like women
but exert yourselves. Guard him with your lives.
I shall go and dig my brother's grave
no matter who is wicked enough to forbid it.

(*Exit Teucer.*)

FIRST CHORISTER
How many years have passed, how many
more must we live through, fighting here
and suffering on this inimical shore?

SECOND CHORISTER
That man deserved better,
to enter heaven or if not that
to descend at last in peace to Hades,
for it was he who taught the Achaeans
to fight in formation with cruel weapons.
His bravery ought to have been rewarded
but men and gods have dealt with him meanly.

THIRD CHORISTER
We stood together side by side
and fought in the field, his courage, his calm
our sword and shield. Lonely and tired,
we lay down to sleep on the cold ground
but when dawn broke we fell in
and marched to the pipes' shrill sound.

SECOND CHORISTER
A hateful god has done this; my heart
is full of disgust. This is no end
for a hero, neither fitting nor just.

THIRD CHORISTER
I want to be home again where Sounion
soars out of the blue sea.
I long for Athens. I am weary of wars.

(*Enter Teucer.*)

TEUCER
I have hurried back here, having seen
that Agamemnon is on his way, no doubt
with more invidious prattle and persiflage.

(*Enter Agamemnon.*)

AGAMEMNON
I have heard reports of your insolence to us
and I come to speak to a son of a captive woman,
which is more than you have any right to expect.
You can stand to your full height and try to pretend
to be noble, with those high-sounding words of yours,
but you are still nothing, just as your brother
was nothing. The suggestion you make about us—
that we are not commanders but merely allies—
is not something a son of a slave should tell us.
But I answer your effrontery with a question:
where did your brother go that I did not?
Do you imagine the Achaeans have no men
but him? You are spouting nonsense. We had a contest
for Achilles' armor, which I begin to regret
if we are to be denounced by every loser.
You are defeated but will not bow to the judges
or accept what they decide, and you hurl abuse
in all directions. There have to be rules and laws
or what we have is chaos. Those who have won—

fairly, I might observe—should not be insulted
by all those who have lost. This has to stop.
One cannot rely on big broad-shouldered men.
What one wants is men who have good sense.
A huge ox makes its way along
the pathway guided by a little goad,
and I see this as the remedy for you
if you do not, on your own, come to your senses.
Your brother's ghost cannot protect you now,
so you should give some thought to what you say,
remembering who you are and what you are.
You have a complaint? Find some freeborn man
who is fit to come before us to speak for you.
Your protestations are all empty babble
to which I am disinclined to pay attention.

SECOND CHORISTER
I wish you could both give some serious thought
to what you say. This is distressing to hear.

TEUCER
See how gratitude evaporates!
How many times did Ajax risk his life
protecting you who now cannot remember
what he did on the battlefield? He is dead
and you haven't the faintest recollection
of how you were shut up in your barricades
to which you had been forced to retreat and he
saved you, fighting alone. You remember that?
Or the fire that blazed around the sterns of the ships
with Hector leaping across the moat we had dug
to guard them? Who confronted him? Who drove him
back? Ajax! He did this deed, not you!
Were these the deeds of a criminal or traitor?

He fought man-to-man with Hector, after
his chit leapt from the helmet from which we drew lots.
And I fought alongside him, the son of a slave,
a barbarian woman's child. It is inconvenient
for you to remember such details, but the truth
is the truth. Besides, we know your father's father
was Pelops from barbarous Phrygia. Who
are you to use such words? Your father's sins
are famous, feeding Thyestes the flesh of his children.
Your mother's father, the king of Crete, gave her
to Nauplius to sell as a slave or to drown.
You are the last one in the world to invoke
family pride. My father was Telamon
and if he won my mother as a prize
she was Laomedon's daughter and a princess.
I am, on both sides, noble. And will not endure
the shame of leaving my brother there, unburied.
Your words are profane and what you propose is outrageous.
Cast Ajax aside and you also lose
the three of us—since I am ready to die
fighting not for your brother's wife but for Ajax.
You shall regret your bravery. A coward
would have better sense than to bluster at me.

(*Enter Odysseus.*)

THIRD CHORISTER
Lord Odysseus, you come just in time
to sort these matters out, if that is your aim.

ODYSSEUS
What is the problem, gentlemen? I heard
from far away the sounds of your disputation.

AGAMEMNON
I was defending myself against his insults.

ODYSSEUS
What insults? What did he say that riled you?

AGAMEMNON
And not only wicked words but wicked deeds.

ODYSSEUS
Explain. What deeds?

AGAMEMNON
He will disobey my brother's orders and mine
to leave the body of his half-brother unburied.

ODYSSEUS
Then let a friend advise you and be of help
as I have done on many prior occasions.

AGAMEMNON
I would be foolish not to hear you out.
You have been the Argives' greatest friend.

ODYSSEUS
I urge you then, in friendship and all candor,
not to trample justice underfoot.
Do not insist that this man remain unburied.
Remember, he was my sworn enemy
ever since I received Achilles' arms,
but even so, I cannot fail to honor
the man who was most valiant among the Argives
who came to Troy, excepting only Achilles.
Not to honor him would be an injustice,

for you would be insulting not him but the gods.
To injure a noble man, even one who is dead,
even one you hated in life, is wrong.

AGAMEMNON
Are you taking his side, Odysseus? Against me?

ODYSSEUS
I hated him when I honorably could.

AGAMEMNON
How does his death change things? Why does that matter?

ODYSSEUS
To gloat over the fallen is ignoble.

AGAMEMNON
A ruler must sometimes risk impiety.

ODYSSEUS
He should listen to friends when they give him good advice.

AGAMEMNON
A noble man should yield to authority.

ODYSSEUS
We could go on like this for a long time.

AGAMEMNON
Think of what kind of man you are defending!

ODYSSEUS
An enemy, but still a nobleman.

AGAMEMNON
Or, say an enemy even if noble.

ODYSSEUS
His excellence counts for more than the enmity.

AGAMEMNON
It isn't very consistent of you, is it?

ODYSSEUS
Friends may turn into enemies any time
and vice versa. You have to adjust sometimes.

AGAMEMNON
Those are not the kind of friends I want.

ODYSSEUS
A rigid mind can get one into trouble.

AGAMEMNON
If I listen to you, we will appear to be cowards.

ODYSSEUS
All Greeks will think of you as righteous men.

AGAMEMNON (*after a pause*)
You really want me to bury this man's body?

ODYSSEUS
I'm not happy about it myself, but yes.

AGAMEMNON
Every man is looking out for himself.

ODYSSEUS
Will anyone else be looking out for me?

AGAMEMNON (*after another, shorter pause*)
All right, but let it be on your head.

ODYSSEUS
If we do this thing, it will be well for us all.

AGAMEMNON
I owe you many favors, and greater than this.
For your sake. But he, alive or dead,
is an enemy. Still, do whatever you want.

(*Exit Agamemnon.*)

FIRST CHORISTER
Whoever denies that you are of excellent judgment
is himself lacking in all judgment.

ODYSSEUS
I hereby announce before you all to Teucer
that I am as much a friend to him now as I was
an enemy before. I wish to join
with him in burying Ajax, and to neglect
none of those things that ought to be done for a hero.

TEUCER
Noble Odysseus, I must admit at once
that your words just now were not what I had expected.
You were his enemy, and yet, alone
among all the Argives, you refused to mock him,
no matter what those deluded brothers wanted
which would have been an unbearable sacrilege.

May the father of all the gods, the first on Olympus,
and the Erinyes, and Justice unite to destroy them
with the cruelty that they have this day deserved.
I thank you for your decent offer to help me,
but I am unwilling to risk offending the dead—
who cannot ever change their minds. Your hands
must not touch him or his grave. In anything else,
we are grateful for your assistance and anyone else's.
Your dealings with us have been above reproach.

ODYSSEUS
I would have wished to help, but I understand,
and I shall depart, deferring to your opinion.

(*Exit Odysseus.*)

TEUCER
We have lost much time. Let someone go quickly now
and dig a deep trench. Let others place
a tripod over the fire for holy water.
Some should go into the tent for his armor.
Boy, remember this moment and help us lift
the body that still oozes blood. Let all
who were his friends help however they can.

FIRST CHORISTER
Mortal men can judge of the past they have witnessed;
the twists and turns of what the future holds
are beyond what even the cleverest may expect.

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Women of Trachis

Characters:

DEIANEIRA (wife of Heracles)

NURSE

HYLLUS (son of Heracles and Deianeira)

CHORUS OF WOMEN OF TRACHIS

MESSENGER

LICHAS (a servant of Heracles)

DOCTOR

HERACLES

(*The palace in Trachis in which Heracles has been living in exile. Enter Deianeira, his wife, followed by the Nurse.*)

DEIANEIRA

There is an old saying warning us all
that we cannot know a man's life until he is dead
and cannot say if he was on balance good
or bad. It's true enough, and yet I can tell
before my man goes off to the underworld
that he has been unlucky and burdened with grief.
I remember when I was a girl in my father's house
in Pleuron, all the trouble about my wedding—
more, I think, than any Aetolian woman.
I had, as a suitor, a river—Achelous,
who came in three different shapes to ask my father,
Oeneus, for my hand. He appeared as a bull
and then as a coiling serpent, and then as a man
but still with a bull's head, and from his beard
streams of water poured as from his springs.
I was terrified. Most girls would be.
And I prayed that I might die before I was sent
to join him in a marriage bed. At last,
when I had all but given up hope, he appeared,
the famous son of Zeus and Alcmene, to fight
with Achelous to win my freedom for me.
I cannot describe the fight. My eyes were shut,
but someone who was there and braver than I
and could bear to watch it might be able to tell you.
I remember thinking that this was my beauty's curse—
to offer sweetness that men would find was bitter.
Zeus favored his son who emerged as the victor,
and I was the bride whom Heracles had won.
I learned to live with one fear after another
that filled my dreams and then my waking hours

as I thought of his dangerous labors. The intervals
between those great exertions allowed us some time
when he could live like a farmer, and we had children.
But such was his life that he had to leave
again and again to carry out the orders
of his Mycenaean master. Those ordeals
are over, but not my fears. After he killed
Iphitus, the cattle-thief, in Tyrins,
we came here to live together in Trachis.
But where he has gone now nobody knows.
I worry. I am sure he is in some trouble,
for I have had no news for fifteen months.
My stomach pains me. Nerves, but I can't help thinking
that he is in pain, too. He left me a tablet
that told me little, but left me to imagine
all kinds of things, none of them pleasant.
I pray to the gods that I am wrong in this.

NURSE

Deianeira, you are my mistress and I
am merely your servant. But I have seen you weeping,
and if it is right for a slave to make a suggestion
to a free person, allow me to say what I think.
How is it that you have so many sons
but do not send one of them to search
for their father? Hyllus now is near to manhood
and he would be the one I'd choose for this.
For his love of his father as well as his love for you,
he would, I do believe, undertake this errand.
But here he comes, on his nimble feet. If you think
my words have hit the mark, make use of them
and of him, too. I wish you only good.

(*Enter Hyllus.*)

DEIANEIRA
My son! I have heard from our servant here words
upon which no high-born woman could improve.

HYLLUS
What words, mother? Tell me what she said.

DEIANEIRA
That your father has been away for a long time.
She wonders why you have not asked where he is.

HYLLUS
If we can believe people's reports, I know.

DEIANEIRA
What is it that they tell you?

HYLLUS
They say that for more than a year now, he's been a slave
to some Lydian woman.

DEIANEIRA
I don't understand.
Why would he do that?

HYLLUS
But they say he's released
and is a free man again.

DEIANEIRA
Alive? Dead?

HYLLUS
They say he is marching against Eurytus' city
up in Euboea, or is about to do so.

DEIANEIRA
Do you know about the prophecies he left?

HYLLAS
What prophecies? You've never told me this.

DEIANEIRA
That he will either reach the end of his life
or, if he succeeds in this ordeal
it will be the last one, after which
we will live on in happiness and peace.
Because he stands at such a crucial place,
might you not go and help him? We are saved,
all three of us, or else we are all ruined.

HYLLUS
Of course I will go. If only I had known
of this prophecy, I would have gone already.
Still, if we think of what his life has been
and what he has achieved, my guess would be
that we have no cause for alarm for father's sake.
But knowing what you've told me, I shall make haste
to do whatever I can to be of help.

DEIANEIRA
Then go, my son. If you are too late to help,
you still may be first to hear of his good news.

(*Exeunt Hyllus and Nurse. Enter the Chorus of the women of Trachis.*)

FIRST CHORISTER
O sun, whom spangled night brings forth
every morning with her death
and then, later, lulls to sleep
even as you blaze with your fire,
I beg of you to keep your eye
on Alcmene's son. You know where he is,
passing over as you do
from the Bosporus to the twin pillars
soaring above two continents.

SECOND CHORISTER
Deianeira's yearning heart
keeps her awake. She lies in her bed
and closes her eyes, but the tears still run
from worrying eyes, plagued by fears
she cannot reason or pray away.
Alone, bereft, she anticipates
a terrible fate that may not befall her.

THIRD CHORISTER
One can stand on the strand and see
the serried waves that the south wind sends,
with multitudes more out in the offing,
but one of those big billows from Crete
bears him up in times of trouble
or some god keeps him free of error
and deflects him from the doors of Hades.

FIRST CHORISTER
I can understand a wife's worry
but I say you should not give up hope.
The son of Kronos has made for mortals
paths that are never free from pain,

but we spin about like the Bear in the sky
and waver between our joys and woes.

SECOND CHORISTER
Nothing persists. The day gives way
to night, as life declines toward death.
Our hard-earned riches run from us,
but then the goods that are gone return
in quick and unimagined reversals.

THIRD CHORISTER
Therefore, Queen, hold to your hopes
and put your trust in the hands of Zeus
who helps his strong and harried son.

DEIANEIRA
You see my suffering and yet cannot imagine
how hard it is unless you feel it yourself,
which is not what I wish for any of you. This wisdom
one acquires reluctantly and slowly
as the zest of youth fades that never yielded
to the heat of the sun, or rain, or biting wind
but bravely asserted itself in the pleasures of living.
But maidens turn into wives and mothers and learn
their share of fears and regrets that come in the night
to ask them about their husbands and their children
whom they cannot protect or even advise.
These are my soul's burdens, the threats of evil
that weigh as much as the evils would, if they came.
Such is the plight of many women, but I
have one more weight upon my mind, a new one,
of which I have never spoken to you before.
When Heracles set out on this expedition,
he left behind some words scratched on a tablet.

He'd never done this before, but simply set out
on what he took to be merely another errand,
and not, as it now seems, of mortal risk.
This time he gave instructions about his estate,
what I should do with my dowry, what parts of his land
should go to which of his children. He specified
a time three months in the future at which he was fated
either to live or die—a dark farewell,
including his wish that in either case I should try
for a life free of sorrow. If he survived
that crucial moment, he would enjoy it with me.
The moment, as he reckoned it, or rather
heard it from the doves in Dodona's grove,
has come. Now. And at each breath I take
I fear it may be my fate to hear the news
that I have been robbed of the noblest of men.

SECOND CHORISTER
Wait a moment. I see someone coming.
He's wearing a messenger's garland and may have news.

(*Enter Messenger*.)

MESSENGER
Queen Deianeira, I come to bring good news.
Heracles is alive and yet again
is the victor in his battle, the spoils of which
he will be bringing home.

DEIANEIRA
What did you say?
Let me hear it once more, if you would.

MESSENGER
Your universally envied husband is coming
and will appear before you by nightfall.

DEIANEIRA
From whom did you learn this? A citizen here?
Or was it a stranger who sent you to report this?

MESSENGER
The herald, Lichas, was announcing this to a crowd
in a pasture where cows graze. I heard it from him
and hurried here to be the first to bring
this welcome news. And perhaps gain some reward.

DEIANEIRA
But why is he not here?

MESSENGER
He is surrounded
by an eager crowd that begs him for details
and is eager to learn what happened. They detain him.

DEIANEIRA
I wasn't asking about the herald, you fool,
but Heracles.
(*to the Chorus*)
Speak out women. Rejoice.
We live to see the day we all have longed for,
and now we can bask in the warmth of this good news.

FIRST CHORISTER
Let the house rejoice to receive
the bridegroom who comes again to his couch.

Send a shout to the skies of Apollo
and sing his paean songs of praise.

THIRD CHORISTER
Call as well on Artemis
his sister, the goddess of hunting whose arrows
bring down the deer. Thank them both.

SECOND CHORISTER
My mind maddens, I hear in my head
the notes of the pipe for the Bacchic dance
that whirls and turns in total transport.
Euoi! Euoi!

FIRST CHORISTER
See, dear lady, before your eyes
this frenzy of joy in the light of day.

(*Enter Lichas with female captives, among whom is Iole.*)

DEIANEIRA
I do, dear women, see. I also see
the procession that appears. I welcome you, herald,
as warmly as I welcome the news you bring.

LICHAS
I am happy in your welcome to me and my news
of your husband's success. When a man achieves a triumph
its fruits are in the words of all who know him.

DEIANEIRA
Reassure me first that Heracles lives,
for everything else is of much lesser importance.

LICHAS
Alive, well, not wounded, and not sick.
To put it in one word, he flourishes.

DEIANEIRA
And where is he? Some foreign land? Or this one?

LICHAS
There is a cape in Euboea where he offers
the first fruits of his victory to Zeus
at Mount Cenaeum.

DEIANEIRA
And tell me why is this?
Was there some vow he made? Or did a prophet
instruct him that this is what he had to do?

LICHAS
It was a vow, and he is obligated
having conquered the land these women came from
whom you see standing before you. They are his captives.

DEIANEIRA
From where did they come? To whom did they belong?
Surely their misfortune deserves pity.

LICHAS
Heracles picked them out when he conquered the city
of Eurytus—for himself and, of course, the gods.

DEIANEIRA
Was it to attack this city that he was gone
for all these countless days and endless nights?

LICHAS

Most of the time he was off in Lydia, sold
as Zeus himself had arranged, to Queen Omphale
to serve her for a year. It was, as I say,
Zeus' doing, but that didn't take the sting
or shame of servitude from your husband's mind.
He vowed that when his term was completed, he
would enslave his enslaver—meaning Eurytus—
and his child and his wife with him. He kept his word,
raising an army of mercenary soldiers
and attacking Eurytus' city. It had been he,
contemptuous, insulting, and boastful
of his incredibly accurate arrows that never
missed their target. He claimed that even his sons,
competing against Heracles with these arrows,
could beat him. Then, at dinner, much in his cups,
he threw Heracles out. In a blind fury
Heracles came upon Iphitus, a son
of Eurytus, following after some wandering horses.
His eyes scanned to left and right and his mind
was wandering too. Heracles surprised him
and threw him from a high ridge at Tyrins—
because of which, Zeus, the father of all,
condemned him to serve as a slave. Not for the murder
but the manner of it, which was not fair combat
but treachery, which he'd never used before.
The gods do not put up with that kind of crime.
The year was his penance, and then Eurytus' defeat
and his city's women enslaved was Heracles' vengeance.
These women you see before you, brought down low
from their comfort and good fortune to this condition.
They are in my charge, and I follow the order
your husband gave me. He is on his way
and, once he has sacrificed to Zeus, his father,

to thank him for this victory, he will appear.
This, in my long story, is the best
and most delightful news I have saved for last.

THIRD CHORISTER
O queen, we share your delight as you gaze upon
the evidence of Heracles' victory!

DEIANEIRA
I have the right to rejoice at my husband's success.
My happiness must be commensurate
with the scale of his achievement. Even so,
I dislike tempting the Fates. Look at those women
and see how one's life can reverse itself from ease
to grief in only a moment. They are his prizes
and yet I cannot help but feel some pity
for these homeless women, these fatherless girls in exile,
free women once but now to live as slaves.
I pray that Zeus may never punish me
using my children as surrogates for myself,
or at least not while I live. I look at them
and what I feel is fear for all mankind.
Poor thing! Who are you? Have you a husband?
Are you perhaps a mother? You look so young
to show such sorrow in your handsome face.
Are you a nobleman's daughter by some chance?
Lichas, who is she? What can you tell me?
Do you know who her parents are? Her eyes
are pools of sorrow and anger. I feel pity
and even some chagrin when I look at them.

LICHAS
How would I know? I didn't round them up.
But she doesn't strike me as the barrel's bottom.

DEIANEIRA
Could she be royal? Did Eurytus have children?

LICHAS
No idea. It wasn't for me to ask questions.

DEIANEIRA
Have you learned her name from one of the other women?

LICHAS
Certainly not. I didn't encourage talking.

DEIANEIRA
Tell me, poor dear girl, what is your name?

LICHAS
Up to now, she hasn't been talking at all.
Weeping, yes, but without any actual words.
And the weeping was clear enough in its import,
since she was taken away from her windswept homeland.

DEIANEIRA
I suppose we must let her be. She'll go into the house
with the rest and there she will suffer a new burden
of troubles to add to those she already knows.
Let us all go into the house. You have done
what you were asked to do, and my work begins,
making the preparations for his return.

(*Exeunt Lichas and the prisoners. Enter Messenger.*)

MESSENGER
Wait for a moment, please. Let me inform you
in private who those women are. You deserve

to know certain things you haven't been told.
But I know, and I think you should, too.

DEIANEIRA
What? As you see, I am in rather a hurry.

MESSENGER
Wait. Listen. What I told you before
was worth hearing—just as this will be.

DEIANEIRA
Shall I call the others back so they can hear?

MESSENGER
No, this if for you, and for these women,
if you trust them, so that I may speak freely.

DEIANEIRA
I do. What is your story?

MESSENGER
That he was lying.
Either he's lying now or he lied then.

DEIANEIRA
What are you talking about? Explain yourself.

MESSENGER
What I heard him saying back there
was that Heracles brought down Oechalia's towers
for Eros' sake. It was the girl who bewitched him
and prompted his attack on Eurytus' city.
The Lydians had nothing to do with it.
Omphale and Iphitus were not on his mind.

These were merely pretexts, summoned up
to disguise the real reason—Heracles' anger
that Eurytus would not give him his pretty daughter
to have as a concubine. That was his motive
in sacking the city. Now he has sent her here
hidden among the other captives, but she
is not likely to serve as a household slave.
It's part of the not very intricate plan he made,
inflamed as he was with desire for that one girl.
This was the talk back there and now, in Trachis,
what people whisper, or even say aloud,
in the marketplace, smiling to one another.
I take no pleasure whatever in saying these things
but I felt that it was my duty. I've told you the truth.

DEIANEIRA
What have I done to myself taking her in,
having been taken in by that herald's story?
What else did he keep from me? Has she a name?
He swore he didn't know their names, even
the one with the dazzling looks I couldn't help notice.

MESSENGER
She is Eurytus' daughter, as he was aware,
and he also knew her name, which is Iole.

FIRST CHORISTER
A curse on those who do evil, but a harsher
curse on those like him who betray their office!

DEIANEIRA
What can I do? Tell me! I am in shock.
The story this man has told me leaves me speechless.

SECOND CHORISTER
Perhaps you should question the herald. You know the truth
and you may be able to force him now to confirm it.

DEIANEIRA
Yes, that's a good idea. At least it's a start.

THIRD CHORISTER
And what can we do? Should we just wait here?

DEIANEIRA
Without my having sent for him, without
knowing I want to talk with him, he's coming.

(*Enter Lichas.*)

LICHAS
I am leaving, lady. Have you any message for me
to pass on to Heracles when I see him.

DEIANEIRA
Don't rush away. I have a question or two.

LICHAS
Ask me anything and I'll try to answer.

DEIANEIRA
Will the answers you give be the truth? Can I believe you?

LICHAS
Of course. I swear by almighty Zeus. The truth!

DEIANEIRA
Who is that woman I asked you about before?

LICHAS
She might have been from Euboea. I don't know her name.

MESSENGER
Excuse me. To whom do you think you are speaking?

LICHAS
What do you mean? Why do you ask that question?

MESSENGER
If you were prudent, you'd answer the question I asked.

LICHAS
To Queen Deianeira, the wife of Heracles,
and my mistress—if I can believe my own senses.

MESSENGER
Exactly so. To your mistress. You admit that.

LICHAS
Yes, of course.

MESSENGER
And if you lie to your mistress
and are disloyal, what punishment should ensue?

LICHAS
What do you mean, "disloyal"? That's a serious charge.

MESSENGER
But isn't that exactly what you're doing?

LICHAS
I don't have to listen to any of this.
I shall be leaving now.

MESSENGER
Just one more question?

LICHAS
I can't stop you, can I?

MESSENGER
Probably not.
But that woman you took into the house just now.
You know who she is?

LICHAS
Yes, why do you ask?

MESSENGER
You know her as Iole, Eurytus' daughter.

LICHAS
Did someone hear me say so? Who? And when?

MESSENGER
The agora buzzes with it. There are numerous men
here in Trachis who have heard you say just that.

LICHAS
I may have said that I'd heard this. But know for a fact?
Know its truth that I can report on? No, sir.

MESSENGER
Will you take an oath that you had no idea
that you were bringing her here as Heracles' wife?

LICHAS
Wife? No. By no means.
Mistress, who is this person?

MESSENGER
I am a man who was there and heard you say
that it was for her that the city was taken and razed.
The Lydian woman had nothing to do with this.
It was simply the passion that burned in him for this girl.

LICHAS
Mistress, tell him to go away. To discuss
anything with a madman is also madness.

DEIANEIRA
By Zeus, whose lightning bolts flash down upon Oeta,
do not trifle with me or hide the truth.
The woman to whom you are speaking is not evil,
and neither is she ignorant about men
who are not pleased for long by the same thing.
No one can fight with Eros, not even the gods,
who rules all mortals too, including me.
I cannot blame my husband for this diversion
or even the woman who causes me shame and trouble.
But lying is something altogether different
and much worse, I believe. Do you do so
on his instructions? You learn a terrible lesson.
You will lose your reputation. No one will trust you
even when you tell the truth. The stain
of this particular crime will never leave you.

Tell me then. For free men to be liars
is a dreadful affliction. And for you to suppose
for even a moment that you would not be found out
was idiotic, when so many people around me
know that every word you spoke was false.
Was it fear that made you do this? That is disgraceful
as well as misguided. For I am more distressed
by being misled than I would have been by the news
however unpleasant that you should have reported.
What is the worst? Heracles has had many
bed partners—not one of whom I've reproached.
For this one, what I felt when I saw her was pity,
knowing how her beauty destroyed her life
by no fault of her own. I can guess how she feels,
her country ruined, her friends captives and slaves.
But I might as well be reasoning with a rock.
Be a liar, but never again to me!

SECOND CHORISTER
What she is saying is right. Do as she tells you
and you may yet enjoy her gratitude.

LICHAS
In that case, madam, seeing that you are noble
and behave in a noble way, I will speak the truth
concealing nothing. It is as this man says.
A passion for the girl took Heracles
almost by force, and it was for her that he fought
and conquered her native city of Oechalia.
I must confess—and give him proper credit—
that he did not instruct me to conceal
or deny what had happened. That was my idea,
because I hated to tell you a hurtful story
and wanted to spare your feelings. I did wrong.

But now that you know it all, and having said
those fine words you spoke a moment ago,
I ask you to be kind to the poor girl.
She did nothing. And he was overwhelmed
by a passion that not even he, with his strength, could conquer.

DEIANEIRA
That is what I am of a mind to do.
I do not intend to succumb to jealousy,
a sickness to which I am now nearly immune.
It is useless to try to struggle against the gods.
Let us go inside. I shall give you a message
as well as gifts for the trouble you have taken
coming all this way. You should not leave here
empty-handed or feel at all ill used.

(*Deianeira, Lichas, and the Messenger enter the house.*)

FIRST CHORISTER
Aphrodite's power is great
and none dares stand against it.
The gods succumb, from Kronos' son
through Hades, shrouded in constant darkness,
to Poseidon in his deep blue kingdom
from which he is able to shake the earth.

SECOND CHORISTER
Who won his bride in a trial of strength
with a mighty opponent? Who set out
for many ordeals of daunting danger,
suffering blows in the heat and dust?

THIRD CHORISTER

One, a mighty river who came
in the form of a bull, was Achelous,
and the other came from Thebes and brandished
a bow, spears, and a fearsome club,
Heracles, the son of Zeus.
Toe to toe they fought for her
whom they both wanted to claim as mate,
while beautiful Aphrodite appeared
to referee as the two struggled.

FIRST CHORISTER

A marvelous melee with fists and weapons,
hoofs and horns and rattling quivers,
legs wound around waists and blows
raining down on bodies and heads,
and while thunderous groans arose from the men
the girl sat still on a nearby hill,
her face impassive although her heart
was filled with fear—for them and herself,
the prize the victor would rightfully claim
and take her away from her loving mother
like a helpless heifer the herdsman leads off.

(*Enter Deianeira.*)

DEIANEIRA

Dear women, while the herald talks to the captives
I have come out here to confide in you
with whom I may speak freely, explaining myself
but also taking comfort from your friendship
that helps me in my suffering. Yes, I suffer,
for I have welcomed the maiden, although I believe
that she is no longer a maiden, strictly speaking.

You can imagine my feelings with both of us here
under one roof, even under one blanket
for him to embrace. The noble Heracles!
This is how he rewards me for all those years
we've lived together and I have kept house for him.
I cannot be angry. I understand he suffers
from a kind of madness to which some men are subject.
But what woman could live this way with a girl—
a beautiful girl—sharing the marriage bed?
I see her in the blossoming of her youth
even as mine is fading day by day.
The eye is heartless and fixes upon what's lovely.
Heracles will still be called my husband
but people will refer to him as her man.
But still, still . . . anger would be ignoble
as well as unbecoming. But I have a plan,
a way I can alleviate my pain.
Hidden away in a bronze pot, I have
a gift I received from a monster, years ago.
You remember Nessus, who used to carry people
across the broad Evenus, not with a boat
with oars or sails, but in his burly arms?
He carried me across. I rode on his shoulders
as I was coming here as Heracles' bride.
Halfway across, his behavior changed and he
took advantage, groping about my body
in a lustful way. I called out to protest
and Heracles heard me, turned, and in an instant
shot an arrow that whizzed into Nessus' chest
and pierced his lung. He staggered and then fell
and as he died he said to me, "Oeneus' child,
you shall benefit from having been carried
by Nessus—if you follow my instructions.
You were my last passenger and I give you

this gift of magical power. Take my blood
from the wound of the arrow poisoned by the Hydra,
and it shall be a charm for Heracles.
Dye a tunic in the blood and let him
wear it, and never again shall he love another."
I have been considering this tunic
that I still have. I remember what he told me.
And the time to put his gift to use has come.
Women in my situation have done
rash and violent acts, which are not for me.
It is love for Heracles that prompts me to use
such charms as I have to regain and retain his desire
and compensate as well as I am able
for the girl's advantages of youth and beauty—
and novelty, to which many men fall prey.
Do you think that what I am planning is wrong? Or foolish?
Let me know why, and I shall abort my scheme.

FIRST CHORISTER
If it works, then why not use it? If what he said
is true then this is surely the time to try it.

DEIANEIREA
I have never used it but have no doubt
that it will accomplish what Nessus said it would.

SECOND CHORISTER
You would have no way of finding out
unless in your time of need you test its power.

DEIANEIREA
That is my view, too. And I see the man
through whom I may make this trial. Do not tell him

what we have discussed or let him imagine
anything other than what I say to him.

(*Enter Lichas.*)

LICHAS
You wanted to ask me a favor. What can I do?
Tell me, for our departure is late already.

DEIANEIREA
While you were inside, speaking to those women,
I fetched this finely woven tunic, a gift
for you to take to Heracles from me.
When you present it to him, do make sure
that no one else tries it on. Keep it wrapped
and away from the light of the sun
or the blaze of altar fires. But have him wear it,
conspicuous in its beauty, on a feast day
when oxen are to be slaughtered. I took a vow
that when I had heard that he was returning safely
after his exploits, I would clothe him in this.
Let him wear this robe to show off to the gods
when he presides at the sacrifice. Take this too,
a circle that has been impressed by my seal
that he will recognize. I thank you for this,
as he will, for your excellent services.
Do not delay or allow yourself distractions
but go to him at once and give him my love.

LICHAS
I shall perform Hermes' sacred function,
bringing the vessel, just as you hand it to me,
and say exactly what you have told me to say.

DEIANEIREA
Go, then, for you know how things stand here.

LICHAS
I do, and I shall explain all that as well.

DEIANEIREA
You will report the kindly welcome I gave
to the foreign girl you brought, and with what good grace.

LICHAS
I will, for I was pleasantly surprised.

DEIANEIREA
You might perhaps be premature in saying
how much I long for him. We cannot know
for certain whether he longs for me or not.

(*Exit Lichas and Deianeirea.*)

FIRST CHORISTER
Those who dwell by the springs at the Hot Gates
where Artemis of the golden distaff presides
shall soon hear the joyous noise of the pipes
in celebration. Sorrows have taken flight.

SECOND CHORISTER
Homeward bound is the son Alcmene bore
to the great Zeus, bearing trophies of valor.
Long have we waited for his return
in ignorance and apprehension.
His dear wife, heart sore, waited
for the war god to let him go
and put an end to his time of toil.

THIRD CHORISTER
May he come and soon. May many oars
of the ship that bears him cut through the waves,
making all speed as he hurries home.
His sacrifices and rites performed,
let him be reunited in love
with the lonely wife who has been our friend,
even by means of the monster's magic.

(*Enter Deianeira.*)

DEIANEIRA
Women, I am worried about what I did.

FIRST CHORISTER
What cause is there for worry?

DEIANEIRA
I can't say.
My fear is that I thought I was doing good
but maybe I was mistaken and did evil.

SECOND CHORISTER
In your gift to Heracles? Is that what you mean?

DEIANEIRA
Yes. I may have acted much too quickly
without the careful thought that might have saved me.

THIRD CHORISTER
Can you explain in any more detail?

DEIANEIRA

Something has happened that causes me to wonder,
and you will, too, I think. I rubbed the blood
into the tunic, using the fleece of a sheep.
That fleece has vanished or, say, was eaten away,
consuming itself. Nothing else in the house
could possibly have done this. Let me tell you
the whole story so you may understand.
I did what the monster told me to do, I followed
all the instructions he gave me as he died.
I kept the tarry stuff in a secret place
away from any fire and never allowing
the sun's rays to touch it until I used it.
I did all that, and then, with the hank of wool
cut from one of our sheep, I rubbed it on
the fabric of the tunic. When I was done
I threw the wool away on the courtyard floor,
and there, when the sunlight reached it, it melted away,
crumbling into nothing and leaving behind
a trace of powder like sawdust from cut wood.
But then, from the place on the floor where I had thrown it,
a clotted foam came boiling out of the ground
the color of the new-pressed grapes in the fall.
From this peculiar phenomenon, my doubts
trouble me. Did I have any idea
what I was doing? How could I trust the monster?
Had he told me the truth, or was it a trick,
a way of getting back at both of us,
whom he had every reason to want to hurt?
Was his last thought of how it would come about
that something like this would happen? Men stray
and women hate and fear this. He trusted us
to be banal and he used that as a weapon!
All this I realize now, but in the moment

I didn't have the composure to think clearly.
If my fears are right, then, I alone
shall have been the cause of Heracles' death—
and an awful death, at that. I think of his arrows
and how when one struck Charon, who was immortal,
it caused him terrible agony. They kill
any beast they touch. And shall the poison
now kill Heracles too, because I was stupid?
That is my fear or, almost, my conviction!
And if he comes to grief, my path is clear—
to die with him and put an end to the evil
into which, unthinkingly, I blundered.

FIRST CHORISTER
It is worrisome, indeed. But it has not happened.
It is never wise to assume that the worst will come.

DEIANEIRA
If one has been foolish, there is no way back,
nor any confidence, nor any hope.

SECOND CHORISTER
It wasn't your intention. You are blameless,
which ought to give you at least some consolation.

DEIANEIRA
Only a person who has not seen trouble herself
would make such a useless, irrelevant remark.

THIRD CHORISTER
We should say no more, unless you want your son,
whom you sent to look for his father, to hear our words.

(*Enter Hyllus.*)

HYLLUS
Mother, I would choose, if I could do it,
one of three things: either you should be dead,
or you should be somebody else's mother,
or else you should be a different and better person.

DEIANEIRA
What have I done that makes you say this?

HYLLUS
You have killed your husband. And my father.

DEIANEIRA
Oh, oh. Those are terrible words.

HYLLUS
They come from what I have seen. It's happening now.
And no one can prevent it or take it back.

DEIANEIRA
And you say that I have done this dreadful thing?

HYLLUS
This isn't something I heard about. I saw it
with my own eyes. And it was terrible.

DEIANEIRA
Tell me. What did you see? Where were you?

HYLLUS
I will tell you everything. He had come back
from sacking Eurytus' city. There is an altar
in a grove on Mount Cenaeum in Euboea,
to Zeus, and he was taking the trophies and beasts

for sacrifice. That was where I found him,
and soon thereafter, the herald, Lichas, appeared
bringing the gift you sent him—the robe of death.
He put it on, just as you had instructed,
and then he slew a dozen unblemished bulls,
the first fruit of the spoils, and a hundred cattle.
He intoned the prayers in comfort and happiness,
but when the flame from the fire on the altar
blazed up, sweat came out on his body,
and the tunic that had been loose tightened all over,
squeezing his joints and tearing at his bones.
He felt a searing pain that seized his body
as the poison seeped through his skin and into his flesh
from the tainted robe you'd sent him. He shouted at Lichas,
who knew nothing whatever and said that the gift
was yours and he had merely been the bearer.
In a fresh spasm of agony Heracles seized
Lichas' ankle and hurled him through the air
and over the cliff to fall on the rocks below
where his white brains splashed out in his white hair.
Those who saw it fell silent at the death
of the one and the terrible suffering of the other
whom no one dared come near. His bellows echoed
among the hills and valleys as rocks resounded
so that all of Locri and Euboea
seemed to share his pain. He writhed on the ground
and complained to the skies of his disastrous marriage.
His eyes rolled in his head but fixed on me
whom he recognized among the throng, weeping.
He called me to him and told me to be brave
even if it meant that I would share
his dreadful death. He begged me to lift him up
and put him where no man could look upon him
and witness his ruin. "But if you pity me,

take me out of this country," he said to me.
"Let me not die here." I did as he asked
and put him into the boat that brought him here,
crying out all the way at every wave.
In a moment or two you will see the poor man,
either barely alive or lately dead.
This, mother, is what you are guilty of,
and for which Justice will surely punish you.
And if it is right, I call down my curse upon you
for having killed the noblest man on earth
whose like none of us shall ever see again.

(*Exit Deianeira.*)

FIRST CHORISTER
Why do you leave without saying a word?
Your silence could be taken as assent.

HYLLUS
Let her go. May a fair wind carry her far
and out of my sight. How can she be my mother
when none of her actions are those of any mother?
Goodbye to her and good riddance. I wish her the same
joy as she has given my noble father.

(*Exit Hyllus.*)

FIRST CHORISTER
What the oracle once said
comes true but not as we understood it.
The twelfth plowing was destined to bring
an end to the labors of Heracles,
the great son of immortal Zeus.
We took these as encouraging words

bespeaking ease and a pleasant life,
never thinking that death can also
end any arduous servitude.

SECOND CHORISTER
Now he suffers the poison and hate
of the dying centaur's cunning bequest,
deadlier than the Hydra's venom
mixed as it was with human failings
without which it could never have worked.
Along with the pain, the punishment
that boils up like oil in a cauldron
is the knowledge of having played a part
as all men and all women do.

THIRD CHORISTER
She had not the slightest notion
of what she was doing but saw the danger
the new woman brought to the household,
a disaster she saw a way to prevent.
Her hands were merely the agent; the will
was that of another malevolent creature
that seized her from beyond the grave.
Much does she lament and many
tears fall, more bitter than salt.
The earth trembles as Fate approaches
from a distance beyond any man's horizon
and to it we all bow low and yield.

FIRST CHORISTER
From him, too, tears are falling
that none of his enemies ever saw.
His agony equals all of theirs
as Aphrodite imposes pain

she so often delights to do.
(*From offstage, the voice of the nurse*)
Aaaieee!

FIRST CHORISTER
What could that be? A lamentation?

SECOND CHORISTER
Inside the house! What could have happened?

THIRD CHORISTER
Lamentation? Or was it pain?
Certainly, some kind of trouble.

(*Enter Nurse.*)

FIRST CHORISTER
Look at her face! See her sadness.

THIRD CHORISTER
Walking slowly, as if reluctant.

NURSE
That gift she sent to Heracles has been
the begetter of more than a single evil.

SECOND CHORISTER
What news do you bring us? What has happened?

NURSE
Without taking a single step, Deianeira
has gone on her last and longest journey.

FIRST CHORISTER
Are you telling us that she is dead?

NURSE
That's what you heard.

SECOND CHORISTER
The poor woman!

NURSE
You heard the scream. And now you hear my words.

SECOND CHORISTER
Tell us what happened.

THIRD CHORISTER
How did she do it?

NURSE
It was not a pretty or easy passing.

FIRST CHORISTER
Tell us, woman! What did she do?

NURSE
She fell upon a double-edged sword.

FIRST CHORISTER
Oh, no!

SECOND CHORISTER
What pain must she have been in
to choose even more.

THIRD CHORISTER

How did she manage this?
Was anyone there to help her? Did you see it?

NURSE

I was not far from her and I saw it all.

FIRST CHORISTER

It is hard to hear but harder not to hear.

NURSE

She did it by herself.

SECOND CHORISTER

I can't believe it.

NURSE

It's true, I'm afraid.

THIRD CHORISTER

The child
of the new woman is a mighty Erinys.

NURSE

If you had been there, it would have broken your heart.

FIRST CHORISTER

But how could she? Being a mere woman?

NURSE

I shall tell the details you can believe.
She went into the house and she saw Hyllus
preparing a litter with which to meet his father.
She hid herself away. She went to the shrine

and fell to the floor before the gods' altar,
not saying words but racked by continual sobbing.
She raised herself and wandered about the house
with fresh sobs as she touched those household things
she had used in the past. She went from room to room,
and familiar faces of servants set her to groaning.
Then she was quiet and hurried away. I followed
as she entered the bed chamber and in silence
ripped away the bedclothes. She lay down,
stretched out, and recommenced her piteous weeping
as she bade goodbye to the bed that would never again
receive her. At last she drew out the golden pin
that held her robe together and threw it open
baring her breasts, her side, and her left arm.
This was when her intention became clear
and I ran as fast as I could to fetch Hyllus
and warn him about what I thought she might do.
By the time we got there, she had struck herself
with the two-edged sword in her side, below the liver,
a mortal blow. Hyllus then cried out
for he realized that he'd been angry when he accused her
of having committed a crime. Only now
could he understand that she had been innocent, tricked
by the spiteful centaur, bent on his revenge.
He was the one who was weeping bitterly now,
covering her with kisses. He lay down
beside her, bereft of both his parents at once.
And he had done this to her and blamed himself.
That's how it was. And I tell you this sad truth:
if anyone speaks of what will come to pass
the day after tomorrow, he is a fool,
for who can tell if even tomorrow will come
until we have managed somehow to get through today?

(*Exit Nurse.*)

FIRST CHORISTER
For which of them do we lament?
Which is the sadder case? Each one
breaks the heart and calls out for pity.

SECOND CHORISTER
One is here inside, the other
approaches from not far away.
Torn between the two, we wait.

THIRD CHORISTER
I wish there were a breath of wind
that could waft us all away from here
and let us know that the courses of nature
have not been entirely stopped.

FIRST CHORISTER
I fear the sight of Heracles
who approaches in his agony,
unspeakable and unbearable.

SECOND CHORISTER
We cried out like so many nightingales
for what was near us, but farther away
was no less devastating and doleful.
A party of strangers approaches, bearing
a litter in which with their heavy tread
they carry the dying hero home.
He says nothing. He makes no sound.
Is he dead or merely unconscious?

(*Enter men carrying Heracles in a litter. With him are Hyllus and an old man.*)

HYLLUS
Oh, father, father! I am in despair.
What will become of me now?

OLD MAN
Quiet, my boy.
Do not make his pain harder to bear.
He is still alive, although just barely.
Bite your lips if you must, but do be still.

HYLLUS
Tell me, sir, are you sure he's alive?

OLD MAN
Do not wake him. In sleep he feels no pain,
but if you rouse him the malady returns
and it is frightful.

HYLLUS
It's hard for me to keep quiet.
My mind is awhirl with misery on all sides.

HERACLES
Oh, Zeus! Where am I now? Alas!
Who are these people around me? Again, the pain!
It will not let me alone, not for a moment!

OLD MAN
Did I not tell you that it would be best to keep still?
You've woken him up from the sleep that was his friend
and the terrible pain returns, as sharp as ever.

HYLLUS
You're right. How can I bear to see him suffer?

HERACLES
Zeus, I wish I had never seen those altars!
Is this the reward I get for my sacrifice?
This agony? This madness that does not end?
Who is the surgeon anywhere in the world
to lull this searing pain? Only Zeus almighty,
who does not help me. He will not allow me to sleep.
Stop touching me, it hurts! Where do you take me?
I had dozed off or more likely passed out,
but you have brought me back to its cruel embrace.
Who in hell are you? Vile Greeks
for whom I destroyed myself, fighting off monsters
and ridding you of pests. This is your thanks?
Will no one at least bring me a weapon with which
I can in a single instant end this torment?
Will no one help me? Cut off my head, I beg you,
so that it can leave my body's ruin.

OLD MAN
I am sorry, my boy. This case is beyond my skill.
Do whatever you can to comfort his spirit.

HYLLUS
I can touch him with my hand, but that won't help.
No mortal can interfere with what Zeus imposes.

HERACLES
Aaiee!
Oh, son, where are you?
Raise me up a little so I can see you.
Oh, that hurts. Everything hurts! Oh, gods!

It leaps up and its sheet of burning destroys me,
implacable, irresistible, and mortal.
Ah, Athena, you have helped me before.
Where are you now in this extremity?
Son, draw your sword and end my torment.
Strike just under the collar bone. No man
will blame you for obeying your father's command.
Your godless mother brought this upon me, and you
can undo the harm she has done. I only wish
that I could see her like this, in exquisite pain
so that she wishes for death as I do now.
Oh, Hades, brother of Zeus, bring me relief,
put me to sleep swiftly and end this
long-drawn-out and pointless misery.

FIRST CHORISTER
I shudder as I hear this tangle of wrongs,
this plague beyond all other lesser plagues.

HERACLES
Many have been the labors of my back
and strong arms, but never before has Hera
or wicked Eurystheus burdened me like this.
The fabric the Erinyes wove for me to wear
that Oeneus' daughter gave me has done me in.
It eats away my flesh. It infects my lungs
and poisons every part of the body I prized,
drinking my blood and sapping my muscles' strength.
No spearmen ever did such a thing. No giants,
monsters, or barbarian hordes did this,
but a mere woman, weak and timid by nature,
has brought me down without raising a hand.
My son, I ask you this one thing. Do not
ever again honor your mother who did this.

Drag her from the house and bring her here
so that I may see if your grief for me is as great
as what you show on your face when I punish her
as she deserves to be punished. Pity me!
Do this at once, while there is still the time.
Look at me weeping the way only women do.
Men don't do this. Racked with pain before,
I never have cried, but this is worse and different
and shows my womanish nature. And I hate it.
But draw closer. Look. See how I suffer.
Gaze upon my misery. Watch the torture
engulf my back and sides in demoniac fury
beyond belief, vicious and unrelenting.
Hades, take me. O Zeus, strike me down
with one of your lightning bolts. I beg you, father,
for the all-consuming hurt blossoms again.
Oh, hands! Oh, arms! Oh, my poor back and shoulders!
You served me well at Nemea with the lion,
a creature none of the herdsmen dared confront.
You conquered the Lernian Hydra. The monstrous centaurs
you destroyed, and the three-headed hound of Hades,
the get of Echidna, mother of all monsters.
I killed the serpent that guarded the golden apples. . . .
All those and more I managed. And there is no
trophy of victory an enemy has raised
to blot my perfect record. But ruin takes me,
reduces my mighty body to limp rags.
I am the son of Zeus—and I am nothing.
I cannot move. And yet I will show that woman
what she has done to me. Let her come near
and she will have to proclaim to all the world
that in death as well as in the life I have led
I punish all those who have done me wrong.

SECOND CHORISTER
Unhappy Greece. We all will mourn his loss.

HYLLUS
Let me answer you father, and, sick though you are,
be patient and hear me out. In the name of Justice
I ask you to be as reasonable and fair
as if you were in perfect health. If you do not,
you cannot learn how mistaken you are in your anger.
You are eager for satisfaction. I can give you
something like that, however different it is
from what you are expecting. Listen, please.

HERACLES
Say what you have to say, and say it quickly
for I am sick, as you see. Get to the point!

HYLLUS
I have come to tell you how it stands with my mother
and how she never intended the wrong she did.

HERACLES
Villain! Traitor! Look at what she did!
How can you even mention her in my hearing?
Where do get the nerve to speak of her?

HYLLUS
The way things are, silence would be wrong.

HERACLES
If you want to look at wrong, look at me.

HYLLUS
Not when you understand. Listen, father . . .

HERACLES
Speak, but watch what you say.

HYLLUS
She is dead.

HERACLES
By whose hand? It is a miracle!

HYLLUS
By her own hand, I'm sorry to say.

HERACLES
Before she could die at mine, as she should have done.

HYLLUS
Let me speak further, and you may change your mind.

HERACLES
Go ahead. You've captured my attention.

HYLLUS
She did wrong, but her intentions were good.

HERACLES
To kill me? That was well intended?

HYLLUS
She thought it was a love potion. She wanted,
with a new bride in the house, to win you back.

HERACLES
And who in Trachis was this mad magician?

HYLLUS
Nessus, the centaur. He gave it to her and told her
it was a love charm she could use someday.

HERACLES
Oh, I am done for. I am a dead man.
I understand this calamity at last.
Go, summon the family, everybody,
and Alcmene too, in order that you may learn
the oracle's last dismal pronouncement.

HYLLUS
Alcmene has moved to Tyrins and lives there now
and has taken some of your children with her.
Others of your children live in Thebes.
But we who are here will assemble and we'll do
whatever you instruct. I promise you that.

HERACLES
Hear what must be done. You have reached an age
where you must show what kind of man you are
and whether you are worthy to be my son.
Long ago, my father let me know
that I would never die by a mortal hand
but somebody dead who was in Hades would kill me.
The prophecy turns out to have been correct
because the centaur is dead and I am alive
and yet it is his hand by which I am slain.
It was at my father's sacred grove at Dodona
where the priests told me that all my labors would end
and that in the fullness of time I would be released
from my arduous exertions. I thought it meant
that one day I'd be happy. But no such thing.
It was only their way of telling me I

would die, for the dead are never forced to work.
That truth, too, reveals itself at last.
And you, my son, must fight beside me now,
for it is pious and right to obey your father.

HYLLUS
I am uneasy, father, hearing this.
But what is it you want me to do for you?

HERACLES
Place your right hand in mine.

HYLLUS
But for what purpose?

HERACLES
Will you give me your hand or not? Will you not obey me?

HYLLUS
Here is my hand. I am doing as you say.

HERACLES
Now, swear by the head of Zeus, my father!

HYLLUS
What am I swearing to? Why won't you tell me?

HERACLES
You must swear to perform the action that I command.

HYLLUS
Very well. By Zeus, I do so swear.

HERACLES
And pray to be punished if you fail to do this.

HYLLUS
I need no penalties. But I so pray.

HERACLES
You know Mount Oeta, which belongs to Zeus?

HYLLUS
I do. I have gone there for sacrifices.

HERACLES
Carry my body there with your own hands
and those of friends you choose. When you get there,
cut down trees and branches of wild olive,
make a pyre, and throw my body on it.
Then take a torch and set it alight
so that the flames rise up. Let me see no tear
on anyone's face or hear any lamentations,
but do this with no mourning and no weeping
as a man must do. If you should fail me in this,
I shall remain as a curse to you in the light
and later, even below in the world of darkness.

HYLLUS
Father! What are you doing to me?

HERACLES
What must be done. If you cannot oblige me,
then find somebody else to be your father
for you shall no longer be a son of mine.

HYLLUS
Father, you ask me to be your murderer.

HERACLES
I ask you to be my healer from this pain.

HYLLUS
To heal your body I must set it afire?

HERACLES
If you can't do that, at least do everything else.

HYLLUS
I shall not refuse to carry you there. I promise.

HERACLES
And piling up the pyre?

HYLLUS
I can do that.
That far, I will not fail you.

HERACLES
That much will do. But there is one further favor
I ask of you, aside from this great thing.

HYLLUS
Great or small, whatever you ask I will do.

HERACLES
You know Eurytus' daughter?

HYLLUS
Iole? Yes.

HERACLES
When I am dead, I want you to marry her.
Remember the oath you swore and do this for me
as a show of your loyalty. Let nobody else
marry her, but take her yourself as a bride.
Having promised great things, do this also,
a small thing, I think, but important to me.

HYLLUS
It is wrong to show anger to someone dying,
but I cannot believe you are telling me to do this.

HERACLES
Are all your promises false, then, easily given
and then, when the time comes, easily broken?

HYLLUS
You remember that she is the cause of my mother's death
and of your lying here in this sorry state.
I fear that your pain is so great that your mind is clouded.
Or else by avenging deities you are distracted.
She is my enemy, father. I'd rather die
than live together with her as man and wife.

HERACLES
You refuse the last request of a dying man?
A curse from the gods will attend you if you refuse me.

HYLLUS
The request you make is evidence of madness.

HERACLES
You drive me mad and then find fault with my madness.

HYLLUS
I don't know how to answer or what to say.

HERACLES
If you disobey your father, what can you say?

HYLLUS
The last thing I want is to be disloyal.

HERACLES
Then do what I have asked you to do. For me.

HYLLUS
If only I could be sure that that's what you want.

HERACLES
I call upon the gods as my witnesses!

HYLLUS
If the gods approve, then I will do it, father,
for if I obey you, who can accuse me of treason?

HERACLES
I thank you for that. But back to the other matter.
Be quick if you would. Get me to that pyre
before I have another spasm of torment.
Lift me up. Take me there to my rest
from all the labors that have been my life.

HYLLUS
If that is your command, I shall obey you.

(*Enter companions, who station themselves at the stretcher.*)

HERACLES
Before you move me, gag me. Make it tight
so that I do not cry out. Let us do this
unwelcome task as if it were a pleasure
for I am resigned to my end and am eager for it.

HYLLUS
Lift him up, my friends, but gently, gently,
knowing how rough the gods have been to him
in these recent events. We call the gods
our fathers, but they look down on our pains
and do nothing. Nobody knows the future
but the present is a disgrace, a cause for pity,
and shameful to the gods. How can they treat
so noble a man so badly? And what can we
expect who are all lesser than he was?

I call on you women to witness: you have seen
dreadful deaths, unprecedented pains,
and who is the author of all of this but Zeus?

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Electra

Characters:

PAEDOGOGUS (an old slave)
ORESTES (son of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon)
ELECTRA (daughter of Clytemnestra and Agamemnon)
CHORUS OF ARGIVE MAIDENS
CHRYSOTHEMIS (Electra's sister)
CLYTEMNESTRA (formerly wife to Agamemnon, now married to Aegisthus)
AEGISTHUS (with Clytemnestra, killer of Agamemnon)

Mute Characters:

PYLADES (friend of Orestes)
SERVANT GIRL
ATTENDANTS

(*Before the palace at Mycenae, a wall of which is upstage and has an imposing door at its center. Orestes, Pylades, and the Paedagogus enter from Left to stand in front of that door, to the right of which is an imposing statue of Apollo.*)

PAEDAGOGUS
Son of the great Agamemnon who led the troops
at Troy, with your own eyes at last you gaze
at the palace you have longed to see of Argos,
where the gadfly stung Io, Inacus' daughter.
You see the agora over which Apollo,
the wolf-god, presides. Off to the left
is the famous temple of Hera. Here where we stand
is the palace of Mycenae, rich in gold
but richer still in disaster. This is the house
of Pelops, the house of Atreus, from which
I carried you off to safety after your mother
killed your father. Your sister gave you to me
to keep safe and rear until you should reach
manhood's strength—to avenge your father's murder.
Now we are here, and now you must decide,
Orestes, and you, Pylades, our host,
what must be done. The dawn is beginning to break
and birdsong enlivens the air in the sun's bright beams.
The stars have faded, and you have reached the moment
when you must act. Collect your thoughts; take counsel,
for soon there will be no time for hesitation.

ORESTES
Splendid man! How often have you shown
your loyalty and, now in your old age,
like a fine steed gone to pasture, your spirit
pricks up its ears and in a time of danger
rouses. We have learned to depend on you

and I will explain my plan. If I am wrong
tell me and correct what I have proposed.
You know that I went to the oracle at Delphi
to consult the god about how I might take
revenge against my father's murderers.
I'll tell you what Apollo said to me:
that I should go alone without armed men
and accomplish by stealth the slaughter I have in mind
with my own justified hand, so I fashioned my plan.
You must enter the house, however you can,
take note of what you see and who is there
and what they are doing, and then report to us
what you have been able to find out.
Grizzled with age as you are, and veiled by the years
that have passed since you were last among these people,
you shall not be suspected. No one will question
the story you shall tell them—that you have been sent
by Phanoteus, the greatest of their allies,
to report upon your oath that Orestes is dead,
killed in a terrible accident in a race
in the Pythian games. Let that be your story.
While you're inside, we shall visit the tomb
of Agamemnon to pay him proper honors,
pour libations, and offer locks of hair.
From there, we shall return bearing the urn
we have hidden away in the bushes. In this you will say
my ashes are contained. If they think I'm dead
that cannot hurt me, even though I'm alive
and even safe. Your story may not be true,
but words that bring us good cannot be bad.
This trick has been done before, and then surprise
enhances the welcome the man receives—or the fear,
for I shall shine like a bright star in the sky
to my enemies' dismay. Meanwhile, I pray

to the gods of the place and my native land to receive me
and grant me good fortune on this mission.
Let the house of my fathers welcome me back,
for I have come to cleanse it, sped by the gods.
Do not send me away in defeat and dishonor
but let me succeed and restore our noble name.
This is my speech, and if you approve, old man,
go and do what you have to do, while we
attend to our business. You say the time has come
and, in the actions of men, time decides.
(*From inside the palace comes the voice of Electra*)
Oh! Omoi!

PAEDAGOGUS
What was that? One of the servants perhaps?

ORESTES
It sounded like Electra. Do you want us to stay
and listen to her lamentation?

PAEDAGOGUS
No,
let us not deviate from Apollo's plan.
Go and pour your father's libations. That rite
may help bring success in what we do.

(*Exeunt Orestes, Pylades, and Paedagogus.*
The palace door opens and Electra enters.)

ELECTRA
O earth, O light and air,
how often have you heard my dirges
and how many times have you heard me
beating my breast in grief when darkness yields

to daylight and I am released from my hateful bed
in this too sorrowful house where I lament
my father's wrongs?
The war god did not take him
in distant strife in barbarian lands,
but here, at home again, his wife and her lover
split his head with an axe
as woodsmen fell a mighty oak.
Father, from none but me comes lamentation
although your death was pitiful and vile.
I shall not desist
from dirge and lamentation
as long as I see the glitter of stars at night
or feel the sun's rays at high noon.
As the nightingale calls out
its songs of mourning for her poor chicks,
I shall sound my complaint here at these doors
and call down to the house of Hades
where he and Persephone rule
and hear the curses of humans.
I shall proclaim my rage
to the Erinyes, the gods' children
who stare with eager eyes at those who have killed
and those who have dishonored the marriage bed!
Come and bring the vengeance my father deserves.
Send my brother to me to who has the strength
to bear the burden of grief that weighs me down.

(*The Chorus of Argive women enters* [*at least three*].)

FIRST CHORISTER
Wretched child of a wretched mother,
your lamentation wastes you away.
You continue to mourn Agamemnon

long since brought down in obscene fashion
by your mother's cunning and sent to his death
by her hard hand.

SECOND CHORISTER
If it is right to say so, we hope
that those who did that deed may perish.

ELECTRA
O noble women, you come with comfort,
and I understand that to do so carries danger.
But I am not willing to cease lamentating
for my father's unhappy fate.
I appeal to your constant kindness.
Allow me to wail as I have been doing.
I beg of you.

THIRD CHORISTER
You cannot by tears or prayers bring your father
back from the black lake of the dead in Hades.
All that this grief and lamentation can do
is bring about your ruin in body and mind.
Some evils can never be undone,
even if that be the only thing you live for.

ELECTRA
Who is such a fool, who is so heartless
as to forget the piteous end of a parent?
Can Procne, the nightingale, stop her mourning
for Itys, her child? Can Niobe hold back her tears?
To me she is a goddess and her stone tomb
is the temple where I worship.

FIRST CHORISTER
You will admit that you are not the only
mortal upon whom such sorrows have fallen.
Even within your family others suffer,
your sisters, Chrysothemis and Iphianassa.

SECOND CHORISTER
And then there is the one for whom we wait,
your brother, Orestes, brought up in innocence,
not knowing his parents' dismal story.
Perhaps Zeus will bring him here one day
to be received in glory and thanksgiving.

ELECTRA
Yes, I wait for Orestes. I am here
alone with neither child nor husband
but only my never-ending sorrow.
He forgets or does not know what he has suffered.
Messages I have from him say nothing.
He longs to see me but year after year passes
and he never appears.

THIRD CHORISTER
Have courage, child.
Zeus is still in heaven
to survey the universe he rules.
Give your anger to him,
and to time which one way or another can bring
relief. Do not despair. And do not suppose
your brother in Crisa's pastures abandons you.
Think of your father, scowling still in Hades,
and learn from him his patience.

ELECTRA
My life has abandoned me, my strength is failing,
and my hopes are gone. I melt away, a woman
without a shadow, for I shall have no children.
No husband protects me. I am a slave
in my father's house waiting on empty tables.

FIRST CHORISTER
I remember that terrible cry when he returned
from the war. Its echo still hangs in the air
as pitiful as the blow of the bronze axe
that struck his head. Cunning and cruelty
brought that horrible action into the world,
whether it came from fate and the gods
or mere human wickedness . . . Who can say?

ELECTRA
It was the worst of all the days of my life
and the night was the worst night. That horrid feast
where the hands of the two of them dealt him a painful death
and took away my life, too! I pray to the gods
that they may repay the suffering they caused
and with their suffering pay for their stolen splendor
as tainted as any such spoils can ever be.

SECOND CHORISTER
Take care of what you say.
You know who brought you these present sorrows.
You are in their power; do you want to invite
ruin when the wars within your heart
break out into daylight?
Do not annoy them or even arouse their interest.

ELECTRA
The terrible actions I contemplate result
from the terrible things that were done to me.
What further ruin do I have to fear?
I understand that you speak words of comfort
but I am deaf to them. Leave me, I pray you,
for the inconsolable cannot be consoled.

THIRD CHORISTER
I speak as a friend would. I speak as a mother
in whom you can have trust and I say to you
do not let your sorrows compound themselves.

ELECTRA
Can there be limits to human grief?
Can we be content to live without giving thought
to death and justice? What man is made like that?
For me to be honored among these people
would be dishonor. For me to seem
resigned would be a descent to the world of brutes.
No trivial pleasure happens in my life
without its mocking indictment.
Even if I were silent, who would be fooled?
My eyes blaze in anger; grief reddens my cheeks.
To accept this life would mean that piety
is dead and reverence too, in a world that has
neither meaning nor any attraction.

FIRST CHORISTER
We understand. We come to do whatever
good we can. If our words were clumsy or wrong
forgive us. We shall do as you wish.

ELECTRA

I am sorry indeed if you think my lamentation
is excessive or has lasted too long. Bear with me,
and ask yourselves what woman, nobly born,
could do anything else? I see each day
the suffering around me and feel the evil.
They do not diminish but grow ever more vile.
My mother is more hateful than anyone else
alive in the world. My rulers who share their throne
are regicides. They killed my father, not
in battle but as assassins! Those two determine
whether I may eat or drink and what.
How do you think I feel when I see Aegisthus
in my father's place and even wearing his robes
or pouring libations at that very hearth
where they murdered him? And then at the end of the day
he goes to my mother in my father's bed
to celebrate and perfect their crime. How
can she suffer such pollution? Has she no fear
of the Erinyes and their vengeance? None at all,
for they have made the day of their crime a feast day
with music, dancing, and sacrifices of cattle
to give thanks to the gods that have preserved them.
I alone lament but am not permitted
to weep or show my grief on that foul day
bearing my father's name. I do not smile,
and for this my mother upbraids me: "Hateful creature,
are you the only one who has lost a father?
Do no other mortals mourn the loss of a parent?
I wish you were dead and in Hades where you could weep
forever to your selfish heart's content."
Those are her usual insults but they get worse
when anyone mentions Orestes. In her rage
she turns upon me and screams that this was my doing.

"You stole him from my arms and smuggled him out
in the hope that he would come back one day to accomplish
what you wish for but cannot achieve on your own!
I promise that you will pay for this!"
And standing beside her, Aegisthus, that dim coward
who lets women fight his battles, agrees
and urges her on. She is right, of course.
I do wait for Orestes to come, as he will
to put an end to this one day. I wait
and I wait but he is not here. I have no news
and my hopes wither and die. In such a case
where there is neither goodness nor piety,
one must contrive to live in a bad world
breathing its air and behaving badly, too.

FIRST CHORISTER
Is Aegisthus anywhere near? Can he hear your words?
Or are you entirely reckless?

ELECTRA
He is away.
If he were here, I could not venture outside
even in silence. He is off in the country.

SECOND CHORISTER
Otherwise we should all be running a risk
talking with you on such subjects as these.

ELECTRA
Believe me, I know for a fact that he is gone.

SECOND CHORISTER
Why do you think Orestes has been silent?
Do you expect him to show up or not?

ELECTRA
He has always said he would. But until this moment
those encouraging words are unfulfilled.

THIRD CHORISTER
Facing a task like this, men hesitate.

ELECTRA
When I saved his life, I did not hesitate.

FIRST CHORISTER
He has a noble nature. He will help us.

ELECTRA
I have clung to that straw like a drowning man.

SECOND CHORISTER
Quiet! I see your sister, Chrysothemis,
approaching, carrying offerings to the dead.

(*Enter Chrysothemis.*)

CHRYSOTHEMIS
What are you talking about outside the palace?
Have you not learned? Do you indulge your anger
yet again, although it is useless to do so?
I know how you feel. I am as angry as you.
If I had the power I'd show them my true emotions—
but I can't. We can't. The winds blow the wrong way
and we have to reef our sails. It does no good
to threaten terrible deeds and then do nothing.
If I am to live in freedom, I must obey
those who are now in power. Don't listen to me

but consider in your own mind your choices
and what the outcome will be of your behavior.

ELECTRA
You, too, are the daughter of our father
and you forget him and show your mother respect.
Your foolish words have to come from her;
they cannot be yours. The choice is between folly
and the so-called wisdom of impiety.
You just said that if you had the power
you'd show how much you hated them. Explain.
Why do you try to deter me from the path
that I have chosen? I do all I can
to honor our father, but you do not join with me.
Along with the other woes you bear, is it not
dreadful to be taken for a coward?
Either persuade me that I am wrong or join me,
learning from me what is right to do.
Suppose I were to give up these lamentations.
Would my life improve? I live on table scraps
but they suffice. By honoring the dead
I cause those two great pain—which pleases me
and, if the dead are capable of feeling,
must please our father too. You say in words
that you hate them, but your actions proclaim louder
something else, as you keep company
with your father's assassins. If someone came along
to offer me your privileges, I would not
change my behavior. Your comforts and rich diet
are tainted, while my meager fare is sweet
because I know that I do not disgrace myself.
I do not want those honors you enjoy
and neither would you if you were to give thought
to what they mean. Remember who you are!

The daughter of the noblest of men!
But people think of you as your mother's child,
which is to say a traitor—both to your father
and also, I regret to say, to me.

FIRST CHORISTER
I beg of you: do not quarrel.
There is truth on both sides, and each of you
must try to learn from the other.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Do not be alarmed. I have become accustomed
to Electra's way of speaking. I understand her
and I should not have said what I did,
had I not heard of a great evil that threatens
to muzzle her protracted lamentation.

ELECTRA
And what is this terrible thing? What could be worse
than my present condition of misery and disgrace?
Say what it is and end our argument.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
I will tell you what I have heard—that if you keep on
they plan to send you away beyond our borders
and in some dungeon, dark as any tomb,
let you live to howl out your complaints.
Consider this and what you risk. Or don't,
but when you are in that dungeon, don't blame me.
I hope it is not too late for you to avoid this.

ELECTRA
Is that their plan for me? When will this happen?

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Whenever Aegisthus manages to appear.

ELECTRA
Let him arrive quickly!

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Have you gone mad?

ELECTRA
I long for him to come, whatever happens.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Is that dungeon what you long for?

ELECTRA
I long to be far from here and all of you.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Are you willing to put your liberty at risk?

ELECTRA
My liberty? To lead this bitter life?

CHRYSOTHEMIS
It would be bearable if you were not so stubborn.

ELECTRA
If I were disloyal. If I were craven.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Yield to greater power as everyone does.

ELECTRA
That may be your way. It isn't mine.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Does honor demand the folly that brings disaster?

ELECTRA
Whatever happens, I pay my father honor.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
You go beyond what our father would want.

ELECTRA
It is only fear that tells you what he'd want.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Please, for your own sake, be more prudent.

ELECTRA
You want me to be as empty-headed as you?

CHRYSOTHEMIS
I will go now to do as I was ordered.

ELECTRA
Who ordered you? What are these vessels for?

CHRYSOTHEMIS
My mother has sent me to my father's tomb.

ELECTRA
To pour libations to her enemy?

CHRYSOTHEMIS
To the man she killed, if that is what you mean.

ELECTRA
Who on earth persuaded her to do this?

CHRYSOTHEMIS
I think it was one of her midnight terrors.

ELECTRA
Gods of my fathers, at last you come to help me.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Is there some way for you to use her fears?

ELECTRA
I don't know. Can you tell me about her dreams?

CHRYSOTHEMIS
I only know a piece of one of them.

ELECTRA
Tell me. Small things can have large meanings.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
In the dream, our father came back from the dead
with the staff he carried that now Aegisthus holds
as he swaggers around. Our father planted the staff
beside the hearth and it grew and sprouted leaves
that covered all of Mycenae with their shadow.
This is what I heard from her attendant
who was with her when she told the dream to Apollo.
I can't be sure whether or not to believe it
but it would explain this errand she assigned me.

ELECTRA

Sweet sister, I say you should do no such thing.
To bring to the grave offerings from that woman,
hateful and sinful, would be an affront to the gods
and men who believe in them. Throw away what you carry
into the winds or pour it onto the ground
for the dust to drink. By no means should you take them
anywhere near our father's resting place
that they would desecrate. Seeping into the earth
they will keep for our mother when she descends,
evil and shameless, to dwell in the world of shadows.
How can she imagine the man she killed
and whose corpse she mutilated will receive
these hateful and insulting gifts you take?
Do you not remember how she cleaned
the bloody axe on the hair of his poor head?
Can these belated offerings absolve her?
You want to bring gifts? Cut a lock of your hair
and take a lock of mine, and my sash as well,
which carries no decoration or ornament,
and kneel before his tomb and offer them,
praying that he come, showing us kindness,
to help us fight against his enemies.
Pray that his son Orestes may appear
alive and well to trample them into the ground.
The day will come when our offerings to him
will be of riches far beyond these tokens
of piety and grief. Who else but him
would have threatened her with such a dream?
But however it came to her, and whatever it means,
you must do as I ask, for both our sakes
and, most of all, for the sake of our poor father,
dearest of mortals, sent too soon to Hades.

FIRST CHORISTER
There is no doubt that the words she speaks are pious.
They also seem wise. If you can, do as she says.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
I will. It is the proper course to take.
I cannot argue with you. I agree
to do as she recommends. But I beg you all
to keep your silence. If my mother should somehow hear
of any of this, I shall have cause to regret
this daring action, even if it be right.

(*Exit Chrysothemis. Manet Electra.*)

FIRST CHORISTER
I am no prophet
but even I can see
Justice approaching
to show her strength
and work her will
in our differing outcomes.

SECOND CHORISTER
We have heard the dream
and can read its sweet omen.
What you have prayed for
we know she will grant.
The time is not distant.

THIRD CHORISTER
The Lord of the Greeks,
that king of men,
the one who begot you
remembers his daughter.

He also remembers
the bloody axe
with the double edge
that dealt him the blow
when he came home.

FIRST CHORISTER
The Goddess of Justice
with many feet and many hands
will come to do her cleansing work.
The Erinyes with brazen claws
have never forgotten Pelops' crime:
he bribed the corrupt charioteer
of Oenomaus to win the race
for Hippodameia, but when Myrtilus
came to demand his payment in gold,
the only reward Pelops gave him
was a quick death in the sea's depths.

SECOND CHORISTER
The marriage was a sacrilege
and the marriage bed in which he begot
his line and established his house was cursed
in a long chain of sins and their dire
but necessary punishments.

THIRD CHORISTER
For this reason we are assured
that the portent is true and they will suffer
for breaking laws established by gods.
No prophecy can come to mortals
or meaningful dreams that tell us our futures
if this apparition your mother saw

in Hecate's night be not accomplished
in the clear light of Apollo's day.

FIRST CHORISTER
The blood that Pelops shed has stained
the house, the family, even the land.
Ever since that charioteer
was hurled headlong into the waves
torments have followed, one on another,
making your palace their domicile.

(*Enter Clytemnestra, accompanied by an attendant with grave offerings.*)

CLYTEMNESTRA
You are spouting off once more, outside the house,
taking advantage of Aegisthus' absence.
If he were here, he'd prevent this sorry display
that brings shame on us all. But I am here,
and in your conduct you show me no respect.
We've heard these complaints before—how awful I am,
how I rule unjustly and do such violence
to you and what is yours. None of it's true.
I do you no violence except to restrain your abuse.
I am weary of your complaints about your father.
I do not deny that I killed him, but as you know
I had good reason for what I did. One could say
that it wasn't me but rather Justice who killed him.
If you were a sensible girl, you'd understand this
and yield to the judgment of Justice. You mourn a father
who sacrificed your sister, Iphigenia.
Of all the Greeks on the shore at Aulis, he
was the only man to commit such a vile crime.
He felt no pain when he begot her, but I

suffered when I bore her. She was not his
to dispose of so blithely. Explain this, if you can:
for whose sake did he sacrifice her? The Argives?
They had no right to take her life. She was mine!
If he killed her for Menelaus, he owed me
a life for a life. Menelaus had children,
either of whom ought to have died at Aulis
in Iphigenia's place, the whole expedition
having been made for Menelaus' sake.
And Helen's. Had Hades expressed some whimsical preference
for my child over hers? Or did your father
feel pity for Menelaus' children
more than for his own? He was a fool.
Whatever you may say, I do believe it,
and she who died would agree with me, I'm certain,
if she had a voice and could speak. I have no regrets
for what I did. I know you disagree
but your mind has been disordered. You must wait
until your reason returns and think again.

ELECTRA
This time you cannot accuse me of speaking first,
or of raising the subject you so much dislike.
But if I may answer let me say a word
in my dead father's behalf and Chrysothemis'
and also my own.

CLYTEMNESTRA
If you had always begun
this way, you might have spared us both much pain.

ELECTRA
I'll try to put it simply. You admit
that you killed my father. What words in the language

carry more disgrace, whether your action
was just or not? And I think it was not just—
for you were urged on by the evil man you live with
whose reasons had nothing to do with Iphigenia.
And as to my father, make your inquiries
of Artemis whose anger he aroused.
I have been told that in her sacred grove
he startled a stag and then, without thought, killed it.
Worse, he boasted about it to his companions.
It was for this that the goddess detained the Achaeans
and required of Agamemnon the sacrifice
of his beloved daughter. That was what happened.
There was no other way for him to assuage
her fury or change the adverse wind's direction.
This was why he acted against his will,
and not for Menelaus' sake. But supposing
that what you suggest has any truth to it,
was that a reason for him to die? At your hands?
What law allows this? If this becomes the law,
then how much pain will you have brought mankind?
And what great cause have you now to repent?
If we are allowed to take a life for a life,
where does that leave you? Do you not deserve
as violent a death? And your Aegisthus, too?
The excuse you offer is lame and has no substance!
Explain, if you can, your absolute shamelessness
in sleeping with the man with whom you share
the black stain of guilt. The two of you killed
my father and now you get children together,
while you cast out the earlier children you bore
my god-fearing father. For Iphigenia
do you now mate with the enemy of our father?
What woman of honor would do that? You criticize
because I upbraid my mother, but I think

that you are less my mother than my tyrant,
oppressing my life with constant, dreadful torments
that you and your mate inflict each hour on me.
Meanwhile my brother, who barely escaped alive
from your bloodied axe heads, is every bit as unhappy
in exile far away as I am here.
Poor Orestes! You accuse me of naming
him to punish you. I would, if I could,
summon him at once to do just that.
Let the world know that I am a stubborn woman,
a shameless person, a shrew, and men will think
it was my fate, coming from such a mother.

FIRST CHORISTER
Consider what she has said. Your face shows anger
but have you asked yourself if her words are just?

CLYTEMNESTRA
Consider what? She insults her own mother
and at her age behaves like a petulant child.
Do you suppose her recklessness would be loath
to cross the line that separates speech from action?

ELECTRA
I do not expect that you will believe what I say,
but I do feel shame at this. I know my behavior
is not right for one of my age and station.
But you force me to say these things against my will.
Your shocking behavior is what begets my own.

CLYTEMNESTRA
Shameless creature! Do I prompt you to say
all these hateful and misguided words?

ELECTRA
You are the one whose words are hateful, and I
am prompted not by them but by your deeds.

CLYTEMNESTRA
By Lady Artemis, I swear to you
that you shall be punished for your insolence
as soon as Aegisthus returns home.

ELECTRA
You see?
Your anger knows no limits! You gave me leave
to say whatever I wished, and now, having done so,
I find myself threatened. You seem not to listen
to me or even, for that matter, yourself.

CLYTEMNESTRA
Will you not let me perform my sacrifice
without these imprecations of evil omen?
I let you say what you wanted. Now leave me.

ELECTRA
Go, please. Sacrifice as you wish,
and do not blame my speech. I shall keep silent.

CLYTEMNESTRA (*to the attendant*)
Raise up the offering of fruit you carry
in order that I may offer prayers to my lord
who lies here to release me from my terrors.
Hear me, Apollo, for my speech must be guarded.
I am not among friends and must be careful
for she will report and distort whatever I say
shouting in her hate to spread her lies
throughout the city. But look into my heart

and read what is written there in capital letters.
Grant that those dreams I had last night,
if they portend well, may be fulfilled,
but if they are threats or warnings, let them be turned
from me to those who hate me. Do not allow
those who plot against me to steal our wealth
and power or carry out their schemes. Protect me,
and let me rule the house of Atreus safely.
Prosper us and our friends and the friends of my children
who do not despise me and are not pained when we meet.
Hear me, Apollo, and shower your grace upon me,
accepting my praise and granting my desires.
The rest, I am sure you know without my words,
for the high gods, the children of Zeus, can see
in minute detail all things here on earth.

(*Enter Paedogogus.*)

PAEDOGOGUS
Ladies can you confirm for me that this,
as I assume, is King Aegisthus' house?

FIRST CHORISTER
Your guess is correct, stranger. This is it.

PAEDOGOGUS
And am I right in assuming further—that she,
who has a queen's bearing, is Clytemnestra?

FIRST CHORISTER
Right again. That, indeed, is she.

PAEDOGOGUS
Hail, madam! I bring you and Aegisthus
news from a friend I think you will find welcome.

CLYTEMNESTRA
Good news is always welcome. But from whom?
Who is this friend of whom you have just spoken?

PAEDOGOGUS
Phanoteus, the Phocian, sent me here.

CLYTEMNESTRA
And what is it he sent you here to report?

PAEDOGOGUS
The short version is: Orestes is dead.

ELECTRA
Oh, woe! This is a day of despair.

CLYTEMNESTRA
Keep out of this, will you? But, stranger, tell me
in greater detail what happened. How did he die?

PAEDOGOGUS
This is the reason I was dispatched here
and I will tell you all. I was there.
He came to the Delphic games where the pride of Greece
competes for glory and rich prizes. He entered
every race and was splendid in appearance
and also in performance. He carried off
the prize in the first race and then continued,
winning time after time. None could remember
any athlete with such a run of triumphs.

The herald again and again called out his name,
and in every heart there was admiration and envy
of noble Orestes, son of Agamemnon,
who once led all the Greeks to the walls of Troy.
It was, for Orestes, a day of great achievement,
but no mortal can claim his life as his own
when the gods decide on mischief. None can escape.
On the second day, at sunrise, there was a contest
of charioteers. Orestes entered the lists
with many others, one from Achaea, one
from Sparta, two from Libya, where they race
chariots all the time, and one with a team
of mares from Thessaly. The sixth had come
from Aetolia with a pair of chestnut colts.
The seventh was Magnesian, and the eighth,
an Aenian with impressive milk-white horses.
The ninth was from god-built Athens, and then the tenth
was Boeotian. They took their assigned places the judges
had determined by drawing lots. And then the trumpet
blared and they were off with loud shouts,
the rattle of turning wheels, and a cloud of dust.
They were bunched together and all were using their whips
to get the most from the horses from whose mouths
foam flew as though from the waves of the sea.
Orestes was close to the rail and each time he turned
at the pillar his axle grazed it, blocking off
whoever was close behind him. The charioteers
were all standing, rolling along in thunder
for six laps, but then at the turn of the seventh,
the Aenian's horses approached too fast from behind
the car of the man from Barca and hit it hard
so that they both were spilled in a mess of wreckage.
The Athenian driver reacted quickly enough
and drove around the disaster on the course.

Orestes had been holding his horses and waiting
to use the burst of speed he knew they had
and he saw what had happened, and how the man
from Athens was the only one left to beat.
He shouted to his steeds and they responded.
The two were neck and neck and nose to nose
going for it. Everything was fine.
It was something to see, I tell you, but then, at the last,
Orestes cut the final turn too close
and his axle hit the pillar and broke. He slid
over the rail and the horses, of course, panicked
while their driver was caught fast in the long reins.
The crowd groaned in pity, watching it happen,
the young man turning and twisting, now upright
and now with his legs pointing into the air.
As soon as they could, some of the charioteers
caught Orestes' horses, slowed and stopped them,
and tried to extricate his mangled body,
bloodied so it was hard to recognize.
Men from Phocia built a funeral pyre
and burned the brave man's body there on the track.
They put the ashes into an urn of bronze
to carry back for burial at home.
That's what it was—terrible to tell
and, for those who were there, even worse to see.

ELECTRA
Oh, gods! The end of our family,
our hopes destroyed in a moment, root and branch.

CLYTEMNESTRA
And do I call this terrible? Or lucky?
It is painful indeed to be relieved from worry
by such calamitous news. It's very hard.

PAEDOGOGUS
Why would you be despondent at this news?

CLYTEMNESTRA
To give birth is a strange thing. There is always
a tie of love, however the child behaves.

PAEDOGOGUS
It would seem then that my coming has been in vain.

CLYTEMNESTRA
No, you must not say that. You bring proof
that the one who sprang from my body and turned away
from the nurture of my breast to become an exile
no longer threatens. He blamed me for the murder
of Agamemnon and swore to have revenge.
I worried night and day and could not sleep.
I lived from moment to moment like one condemned
to die. But now, at last, I can breathe easy
in freedom and peace. This woman here and Orestes
spewed hatred I need no longer fear.
Now her endless threats are all in vain.

ELECTRA
O Orestes, hear her talk. Your disaster
is also mine. Her insults no longer reach you,
and if I am alive, I'm no better off.

CLYTEMNESTRA
As you've just said, he is well off this way.

ELECTRA
Nemesis! I call upon you! Hear her.

CLYTEMNESTRA
Nemesis has heard and decided rightly.

ELECTRA
It is your moment of triumph. Go on, insult me.

CLYTEMNESTRA
What can you and Orestes do to me now?

ELECTRA
You are correct. We are the ones who are stopped.

CLYTEMNESTRA
If only for putting an end to her raging, stranger,
you would have deserved our deepest thanks.

PAEDOGOGUS
May I depart then, madam, if all is well?

CLYTEMNESTRA
Certainly not. That would be shabby treatment,
unworthy of myself and of him who sent you.
Come inside, rest, and leave her here
to scream in impotent anger to her friends.

(*Clytemnestra and Padeogogus exeunt into the palace. Manent Electra and Chorus.*)

ELECTRA
You think she feels any grief? Not at all.
She is happy. The misery is mine.
Orestes, you have killed me with your death.
You have carried away the only hope I had,
the dream I clung to that you would come someday

to aid me in avenging our murdered father.
Now, to whom can I turn? Where can I go?
Without you and my father, I am alone,
a slave to the mortals I hate most in this world,
our father's assassins. I see no choice but to live
here at the gate, friendless, wasting away,
waiting for the end of a dreadful life.
And if someone inside decides to kill me,
I shall be grateful and content to die.
What is distasteful is drawing meaningless breaths.

SECOND CHORISTER
Where is the famous anger of Zeus? Where
is Apollo's righteous wrath? How can they hide them?

ELECTRA
Aieee! Oh, oh!

THIRD CHORISTER
Why do you weep, child?

ELECTRA
Aiee! Aiee!

THIRD CHORISTER
Do not cry out! It cannot do you good.

ELECTRA
You will kill me this way, the three of you!

FIRST CHORISTER
How?

ELECTRA
If you tell me that there is still some hope
from one who is now among the shades, your comfort
only wounds my broken spirit deeper.

SECOND CHORISTER
Think of Amphiaraus and the necklace
with which his wife had been bribed. Their son Alcmaeon
in time avenged his father and killed his mother.

ELECTRA
Oh, oh, oh.

SECOND CHORISTER
Unlike the other dead, Amphiaraus
retained his mental powers, even in Hades.

ELECTRA
O moi! Alas!

THIRD CHORISTER
Yes, alas. But the killer, Eriphyle . . .

ELECTRA
I know. She was killed in turn.

THIRD CHORISTER
Exactly so!

ELECTRA
But there was a champion who appeared for the mourner.
For me, with Orestes gone, I have no one.

FIRST CHORISTER
A terrible thing. I understand your grief.

ELECTRA
It is my life, my fate. A torrent of evils,
a stream that never runs dry in any season.

SECOND CHORISTER
We have been witnesses to those terrible things.

ELECTRA
I can bear no more. Take me away from this . . .

THIRD CHORISTER
What are you saying?

ELECTRA
. . . pointless and useless hoping. Orestes is dead.

FIRST CHORISTER
For all mortals, death imposes an ending.

ELECTRA
But this kind of ending, torn to pieces by horses,
struggling helpless in that tangle of reins.

SECOND CHORISTER
Horrible, horrible.

ELECTRA
In a foreign land, alone, without my touch . . .

CHORUS (*together*)
Alas! Alas!

ELECTRA
And without our lamentation at his pyre.

(*Enter Chrysotheymis.*)

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Pardon me for running, but I deliver
excellent news! Your troubles are over now.
No more grieving! I bring you happiness!

ELECTRA
What are you talking about? What help can you bring
to the sorrows I bear for which there is no cure?

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Orestes is here. As sure as I stand before you.
I've seen him. I swear to you that this is true.

ELECTRA
Poor thing! You have gone mad. Or do you mock me?

CHRYSOTHEMIS
No mockery. No joke. By our father's hearth,
I tell you that he is here and is alive.

ELECTRA
You haven't. You have heard a cruel rumor
that in your innocence you report as truth.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
I tell you that I have not heard but seen.

ELECTRA
What is it exactly you claim to have seen?
And in what misleading light have you seen this?

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Listen to me, will you. Then decide
whether or not what I report is true.

ELECTRA
Speak then, for whatever good it will do.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
This is what I saw. I approached the tomb
in which our father lies and saw fresh milk
streaming down that someone had just poured.
And around our father's urn was a wreath of flowers
of every kind, and none of them was wilted.
I looked around, of course, to see who was there.
I approached the tomb and looked at it more closely
and there it was, as plain as day—the hair.
Someone had left a lock of hair. Who else
but Orestes could have done this? You were back here,
and I hadn't done it. My eyes were full of the sweet
tears of joy. There are no other kinfolk
who could have left such a gift. Surely not
our mother, who has never done such a thing.
It wouldn't be like her. It has to be
Orestes. Take courage, as I have done.
One's fortune can change. Grief is not always followed
by more grief. For all our miseries still
good may come from an unexpected quarter.

ELECTRA
Poor girl. What you say is folly.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Why? Do my words not please you? Do you doubt me?

ELECTRA
I don't think you can tell up from down.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
But that's what I saw. And nothing else makes sense.

ELECTRA
Neither does that. Don't you get it? He's dead!
He isn't coming to save us. Not anymore.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
I don't believe it. From whom did you hear this?

ELECTRA
From someone who was there and saw him die.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Who? Where is he?

ELECTRA
He's gone into the house.
Our mother, I don't have to tell you, is delighted.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
But then . . . from whom could those offerings have come?

ELECTRA
Perhaps somebody put them there for Orestes.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Oh, gods. I was so sure. I am sorry.
I ran as fast as I could with what I believed
was wonderful news. And now we're back where we were,
or even worse off. I had felt such hope . . .

ELECTRA
I understand. Still, if you will obey me,
there is a way to relieve our present pain.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Can I make the dead rise again and live?

ELECTRA
That is not what I meant. I'm not a fool.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Then what is it? What can I do to help you?

ELECTRA
If you have the heart for it and the stomach . . .

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Whatever I can do, I promise to do.

ELECTRA
It won't be easy, I warn you.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Say what it is.

ELECTRA
This is what I plan to do. As you know,
we have no friends left to give us help

and therefore must act alone. As long as I hoped
that Orestes might come to avenge our father's murder,
I was content to wait. But that won't happen,
and I look to you to help me. The two of us,
sisters, must kill Aegisthus who killed our father.
There's no getting around it. How long can we bear
doing nothing? For what help can we look?
You can lament being cut off from the wealth
our father would have left us. You can complain
of growing older until you reach the age
beyond which there can be no marriage. Forget
all those things. It was always Aegisthus' plan
to prevent us from having children that could be
a threat to him someday. I say, join me
and you will deserve credit from our father
and brother who lie below. More than that
you and I will be free again—as we should be.
You can marry, for you will have many offers.
And if it matters to you, we will be famous,
admired by all men everywhere for courage.
Who will not praise us, the good sisters,
the two who preserved their father's ruined house?
People will say that in our desperate state,
surrounded by enemies, always watched as we were,
we took no thought of safety but risked our lives
to avenge an ugly murder. All shall revere
what we did and love us for having done it.
We shall be honored at feasts and receive toasts
for having shown such bravery. In life
or death our fame will shine forever. Come,
I beg you, for our father's sake and our brother's,
to save me from my sorrows and save yourself.
For the nobly born to endure a shameful life
is a worse shame and not for two like us.

FIRST CHORISTER
In such matters as this, both speaker and hearer
should think deeply. Look into your hearts.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
If she were going to think deeply, she would have
before she spoke. She does not show good sense.
With what do you arm yourself except your rashness?
And you call on me to help you. For my strength?
Do you not understand that we are women
and he is a man, stronger than both of us?
Fortune smiles on him and day by day
he grows while we ebb into powerlessness.
How can you plan to kill such a man and expect
to emerge unscathed by catastrophe? Our plight
is dreadful and such speaking makes it worse.
What if someone should hear you? What if these
present repeat what you've said to the wrong ears?
To acquire fame among men means nothing to us
if we die an ignoble and violent death.
Before you wipe out what is left of our house,
be careful what you say. I shall keep quiet
as you should, too. Soon you will see the truth—
that those without strength must yield to them who have it.

SECOND CHORISTER
Listen to what she says. Her words are wise
as you must realize upon reflection.

ELECTRA
You have not said anything surprising.
I supposed you would reject what I was proposing.
Very well, I shall have to act alone,
for there is no way to avoid it or leave it undone.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
I wish you had been this fierce when our father was killed.
Nobody and nothing could have stopped you.

ELECTRA
My nature has not changed, but I am wiser.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
I trust this wisdom will last throughout your life.

ELECTRA
You say this as the bystander you are.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Yes, because I fear your attempt will fail.

ELECTRA
I envy your caution but hate your cowardice.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
You are right, I am afraid, on both of these charges.

ELECTRA
I promise, I will never do you hurt.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
We'll see. "Never" is a very long time.

ELECTRA
Go then. You cannot help me.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
But I can,
if only you could listen to what I'm saying.

ELECTRA
Go, go. Tell all this to your mother.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
No. Believe me, I do not hate you.

ELECTRA
And yet you force me to this dishonor alone.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
You refuse to understand that I care about you.

ELECTRA
Must I comply with what you think is right?

CHRYSOTHEMIS
You would, I think, if you had any sense.

ELECTRA
You speak well but what you say is wrong.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
I could say the same thing about you.

ELECTRA
Do you honestly doubt what's plain to me?

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Sometimes being right is full of peril.

ELECTRA
That is a shameful maxim as you must know.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
It's nothing to be proud of, but I am afraid
that, keeping on your course, you will learn its truth.

ELECTRA
I refuse to be frightened by anything you say.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
I'm sorry to hear that. Will you not reconsider?

ELECTRA
No matter how long I ponder, wrong remains wrong.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
I speak but you refuse to hear me.

ELECTRA
This decision I made long ago.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
In that case, there is nothing to say. I'll leave you.
You disapprove my words and I, your actions.

ELECTRA
There, I'm afraid, we agree. More talk would be futile.

CHRYSOTHEMIS
Yes, alas! But time, I fear, will tell
and you will have to admit that I was right.

(*Exit Chrysothemis.*)

FIRST CHORISTER

Look at the twittering birds
who show their wisdom nursing their young,
as they, in turn, will care for their hatchlings,
a labor of joy for the sake of life.
But humans do not behave this way.
The sky flashes with Zeus' lightning,
warning us of the instant of judgment.
Trouble will follow as sure as the thunder
that rumbles a warning to Atreus' house,
a bleak message of dark dishonor.

SECOND CHORISTER

A curse plagues this suffering house,
and children argue one with another
rather than clinging together to life.
Alone, the daughter, far from shore,
struggles against a terrible tide,
ever lamenting her father's fate
in the steady plaint of the nightingale,
sick of life and reckless of death
as long as she can summon the Fates
to wreak vengeance for her and her father.

THIRD CHORISTER

The burden of nobles is heavy indeed,
for they do not suffer a sullied fame.
Instead, you have chosen tears and glory
in what must be a vain battle.
May you somehow triumph over
implacable foes and rise above them
from your low state of strength and wealth.
You have suffered but never failed

in pious observance of Zeus' laws,
who may, we pray, contrive to reward you.

(*Enter Orestes and Pylades with two attendants. Orestes carries an urn.*)

ORESTES
Ladies, are we headed right? We were told
that this is where we want to go.

FIRST CHORISTER
And where is that?
What are you looking for?

ORESTES
People have said that this is Aegisthus' palace.

FIRST CHORISTER
Those people gave you accurate directions.

ORESTES
Then which of you can go in to announce us?

FIRST CHORISTER (*indicating Electra*)
That woman there would be the likeliest one.

ORESTES (*to Electra*)
Would you tell them inside that two Phocians are here
and wish to speak to Aegisthus and bring him news.

ELECTRA
Omoi! You bring proof of the story we've heard?

ORESTES
I don't know what that story was. We bring
word to him from Strophius of Orestes.

ELECTRA
I tremble in fear. What is your news, stranger?

ORESTES
That he is dead. His ashes are in this urn
which we have brought home to be entombed.

ELECTRA
I see it there. I should have been able to guess.

ORESTES
If you have any tears to shed for him,
know that what remains of him is here.

ELECTRA
Stranger, let me hold it. If this bronze urn
contains Orestes, I must weep for him,
myself, and his survivors in this house.

ORESTES (*to attendant*)
Give it to her. Whoever she is, she asks this
not in any enmity. She is a friend
or perhaps even some relation of his.

ELECTRA
O you sad relic of that dearest man,
poor Orestes, how far have you fallen
from the hopes I had for you when I sent you away.
This is how you come back. You are next to nothing
and I hold you in my hands, the glorious brother

whose life I once saved with these same hands.
I sent you to a foreign land for safety
hoping that you would come back to do murder
to avenge our father who lies nearby in his tomb.
Instead, you come to join him, having met
a wretched ending, alone and far from home.
I was not there to wash your broken body
or take from the blazing pyre with trembling hands
your ashes, as it would have been proper to do.
Strangers did that and they have brought you here,
the pitiful contents of a little urn.
I helped to bring you up. You were mine
as much as your mother's. Not one of the nurses
was closer to you than I was. You called me sister
but I was your nurse, too. Like some whirlwind
death has taken it all away, you,
those long-ago times, my hopes for all these years. . . .
Dying, you have killed me, too. Our father
is gone, and now our enemies laugh at us.
Our wicked mother squeals in her delight,
she, whom in your letters, you promised to punish.
Our lives have turned to ashes. We are shadows,
and I shall join you soon in the world of shades.
Wait for me, brother, and into your gloomy mansion
receive me with the welcome I had in mind
to offer you here in the land of light. Time
has come to a stop. There is no past or future
but only this dismal present, extending forever.
Here among the living I shared your fate
and I will continue to do that. I want to die
and to be excluded no more from the sepulcher's quiet
in which the dead are enviably indifferent.

SECOND CHORISTER
Do not lament so bitterly. Remember,
your father was mortal as was Orestes, too.
This is a debt that each of us must pay.

ORESTES
I cannot control my tongue for another minute!
The words thrust forward between my hard-pressed lips.

ELECTRA
What are you trying to say, or not to say?

ORESTES
Is that woman Electra, as I believe?

ELECTRA
I am she, and in a sorry state.

ORESTES
So much lamentation. I am sorry.

ELECTRA
Surely, stranger, you are not sorry for me.

ORESTES
I am. For you. Dishonored and all but ruined.

ELECTRA
Yes, I am.

ORESTES
Alas, and still unmarried.

ELECTRA
Yes, that, too. Why do you stare at me?

ORESTES
To see how few of my own sorrows I know.

ELECTRA
Your own sorrows? How do you see those?

ORESTES
I can see that you have suffered much grief.

ELECTRA
Just from looking at me, you can't tell much.

ORESTES
I can see a lot. I cannot imagine worse.

ELECTRA
You know I live with murderers?

ORESTES
Murderers? Who?

ELECTRA
The murderers of my father. And they have enslaved me.

ORESTES
Who treats you so?

ELECTRA
She is called my mother
but she is the farthest thing there can be from a mother.

ORESTES
Is she mean to you? Or even violent?

ELECTRA
Both.
I suffer continual torments of every kind.

ORESTES
And you have no one to help you or even console?

ELECTRA
There was one, but his ashes are in that urn.

ORESTES
My heart is full of compassion for you.

ELECTRA
Is it?
Then you are the only one, generous stranger.

ORESTES
It is true. I do, indeed, share your grief.

ELECTRA
Who are you then? Surely not a kinsman?

ORESTES
I'd tell you, but can we trust these women here?

ELECTRA
They are loyal. I trust them. So can you.

ORESTES
Then put the urn down and I shall explain.

ELECTRA
Don't ask me to do that. Please, I entreat you.

ORESTES
Do as I bid you. You will understand why.

ELECTRA
You take away from me what I love most.

ORESTES
I don't, I assure you. You must let it go.

ELECTRA
Orestes! I cannot even bury you.

ORESTES
Don't say such a thing. It's wrong and also unlucky.

ELECTRA
How can it be wrong to mourn for my brother?

ORESTES
In the first place, it would be incorrect.

ELECTRA
You will not let me honor a dead man?

ORESTES
That is not at all what you would be doing.

ELECTRA
It would be if these are Orestes' ashes.

ORESTES
They aren't Orestes. That was . . . a useful fiction.

ELECTRA
For gods' sake, then, where is his tomb?

ORESTES
There are no tombs for men who are still alive.

ELECTRA
What? What are you saying?

ORESTES
I'm telling the truth.

ELECTRA
Then is he alive?

ORESTES
He is, if I am alive.

ELECTRA
Is that a figure of speech? Or are you he?

ORESTES
Look at this seal. It was, as you'll see, our father's.
Then consider whether I'm telling the truth.

ELECTRA
Oh, gods! It's you.

ORESTES
Yes. And it's you.

ELECTRA
You have really come?

ORESTES
Yes, I am here.

ELECTRA
It's you I hold in my arms.

ORESTES
Now and forever.

ELECTRA
Dearest friends, you see my brother Orestes,
revived in fact from a death that was only a fiction.

FIRST CHORISTER
We see him.

SECOND CHORISTER
There are tears in our eyes, too.

ELECTRA
Dearest of all bodies, you have come.
You have arrived and are found. I see and touch you!

ORESTES
Yes, but keep silent. Wait a while.

ELECTRA
Why? What is the trouble? Are you afraid?

ORESTES
Silence would be better. We shouldn't want
anyone inside to know I'm here.

ELECTRA
I swear by ever-virgin Artemis
that I am not afraid of those wicked women,
useless and a burden upon the earth.

ORESTES
Women, though, can work up the courage to kill,
as you and I have reason to remember.

ELECTRA
Yes. That. It is always in my mind,
a steady note resounding in the air,
but it can come to the fore to bring fresh pain.

ORESTES
I know. And there will come a moment soon
for us to remember as clearly as we can.

ELECTRA
A moment? It is an eternity—the air
I breathe, the ground I walk on step by step.
The rest of life is nothing but a distraction.

ORESTES
Exactly so. But for the time being
keep silent.

ELECTRA
And then? And then? Action?

ORESTES
It is not yet the time to speak of that.

ELECTRA
To barter speech for silence when I have
my brother back from beyond all hope? I promise.

ORESTES
Your prayers were a help, for some god brought me home.

ELECTRA
It seems to me the action of a god.

ORESTES
It is hard to restrain our joy, but I must urge you . . .

ELECTRA
I have waited years for this. Do not,
I beg you, seeing me as happy as I am . . .

ORESTES
Do not do what?

ELECTRA
Please, do not act rashly.
Do not make me forgo the great solace
I am able to take from seeing your face.

ORESTES
No, that would not be right.

ELECTRA
You promise, then?

ORESTES
Of course. Yes, I promise.

ELECTRA
Dearest brother, I have heard a voice
I never thought to hear again. My eyes
welled up but I did not cry out or make a sound.
You appear before me as you have appeared in dreams
which have survived into the waking world.

ORESTES
Let us not talk anymore. You need not tell me
our mother is evil. I know. And I know Aegisthus
wastes our wealth in luxurious dissipation.
We can save time that we will need for action.
Tell me where to stand, where to hide
to put a stop to the jeers of our enemies.
Do not let mother see the joy in your face
when you go into the house. Continue to mourn
as you did for the false news of catastrophe.
There will be time later to laugh and grin
in freedom and even dance in our triumph.

ELECTRA
I shall do exactly as you say,
for my delight comes as a gift from you.
I would not accept great riches if they came
even at a trivial cost to you.
You have heard how things are here at the moment:
Aegisthus is off on a trip, but mother stayed home.
Do not fret about the look on my face:
she will think my tears of joy are the same
as I have been shedding for years. Mostly, I'm numb,
and if father should also return alive again

it would not be more surprising. Now you are here.
Tell me what to do. Had you not come
my choice would have been to save myself with honor
or else—if it came to that—to perish with honor.

ORESTES
Do as I ask and keep still. I hear at the door
that someone is coming.

ELECTRA
Yes, stranger, enter.
With what you carry, no one would dare refuse
to admit you. The welcome you get will be warm, indeed.

(*Enter Paedogogus.*)

PAEDOGOGUS
You fools! What do you think you're doing out here
making all this noise? Have you no sense?
Do you have even a notional preference for living?
Here you are in the midst of the greatest dangers
chattering away like a pair of birds.
Had I not been standing inside the door
somebody else would have heard you, found you out,
and gone to report you. But I have dealt with this.
Now you must stop the easy celebration
and address the difficult work that lies before you.
This is the moment for action. Don't let it pass.

ORESTES
What shall I find when I go inside?

PAEDOGOGUS

It's fine.
Nobody recognized me.

ORESTES

You said I was dead?

PAEDOGOGUS

They think you are in Hades.

ORESTES

Are they pleased?

PAEDOGOGUS

We can talk about that later when this is finished.
Inside things are just as you'd want them to be.

ELECTRA

Who is this person, Orestes?

ORESTES

Do you not see?

ELECTRA

I've never seen him before.

ORESTES

You gave me to him
all those years ago, when I was an infant.

ELECTRA

Him? Are you sure?

ORESTES

He was the one who brought me
out of Mycenae and took me to Phocia and safety.

ELECTRA

He was one of the loyal ones on that day?

ORESTES

Yes, but as he says, enough talking.

ELECTRA

What a wonderful day. After all these years
to see you again, the man who preserved our house.
Your precious hands held all our hopes and your feet
led the way to a far-off sanctuary.
And I didn't even recognize you! For words
that killed me to hear, and all of them false, I thank you.
As much as I hated you then, I love you now
in the space of a single day. Dear man, dear man!

PAEDOGOGUS

Enough, woman! We shall have many nights
to tell one another tales. Now, Electra,
the time has come to act. This is the moment:
Clytemnestra is all by herself. No guards.
But they will be back on duty soon enough,
skilled soldiers in numbers that will be daunting.

ORESTES

I agree. We go inside at once
to salute the household gods and ask their blessing.

(*Orestes, Pylades, and Paedogogus enter the palace.*
Manent Chorus and Electra, who speaks to Apollo's statue.)

ELECTRA
Lord Apollo, hear their prayers
and mine too. I have often stood here
in pious supplication and offered
meager gifts that were all I had.
Now I fall before you, begging:
help in this plan and show us mortals
how the gods reward the wicked.

(*Electra follows the others into the palace.*)

FIRST CHORISTER
Ares advances, breathing blood
of family fighting under this roof.
A pack of hounds' baleful bays
follow close on the heels of evil.
My mind's eye widens in wonder
at vague visions that focus to truth.

SECOND CHORISTER
The son enters the house to scour
the foul taint of a former time.
His father sat on the throne and ruled
and he draws near with his weapon honed
to a deadly edge for a deed of blood,
while Hermes hides away the outcome
that looms like a shadow coming closer.

(*Electra comes out of the palace.*)

ELECTRA
Dearest friends, the men inside will soon
finish their work. Meanwhile, wait in silence.

FIRST CHORISTER
What's happening? What are they doing?

ELECTRA
She is preparing to bury the urn and its ashes.
The two men are serving as her attendants.

SECOND CHORISTER
But you have come out here? Why?

ELECTRA
To keep watch
and let them know inside if Aegisthus is coming.
(*From the palace comes the voice of Clytemnestra*)
Ah, there are no friends here. Only killers!

ELECTRA
Do you not hear the lovely sounds from inside?

SECOND CHORISTER
I heard a fearsome cry. It makes me shudder.
(*voice of Clytemnestra*)
Help! Aegisthus! Where are you? Come!

ELECTRA
Again, a cry for help!
(*voice of Clytemnestra*)
My child! I am your mother! Have pity!

ELECTRA
But did she have pity for him? Or for our father?

THIRD CHORISTER
Unfortunate city. The fate that has been waiting
has come to us at last in this grisly death.
(*voice of Clytemnestra*)
Aaeeee! I am struck. Oooh.

ELECTRA
Good! Again! And harder!
(*voice of Clytemnestra*)
Oh, and again!

ELECTRA
I only wish it were Aegisthus, too.

SECOND CHORISTER
The curses are fulfilled. Those shades in the ground
are alive, revived by the flow of the dark blood
into the earth, replenishing what they lost.

ELECTRA
Here they come. Their hands are fouled with blood
from the pious sacrifice they made to Ares,
praiseworthy in every way.

(*Enter Orestes and Pylades.*)

ELECTRA
Orestes,
thank heaven. How was it? What happened?

ORESTES
It's done. All is well. Apollo here
prophesied rightly.

ELECTRA

And the terrible woman is dead?

ORESTES

Never worry again about her insults.
You shall not hear another word from her.

ELECTRA

Oh, dear brother! Dear, dear brother.
But wait,
I see Aegisthus approaching. Hide somewhere.

ORESTES

Where? Where is he?

ELECTRA

He's coming from the city.
Him, with the grin on his fatuous face.

FIRST CHORISTER

Go
into the palace, quickly. What you have started
you'll soon be able to finish.

ORESTES

It will be done.

ELECTRA

Hurry, hurry.

ORESTES

We're going.

ELECTRA

I'll handle him.

(*Exeunt Orestes and Pylades.*)

FIRST CHORISTER

It might be a good idea to be nice to him
and let him go inside suspecting nothing
of what Justice has waiting for him there.

(*Enter Aegisthus.*)

AEGISTHUS

Where are the two Phocians who have come
with the news of how Orestes lost his life
in a chariot race? Electra, you can tell me,
you who have been so insolent for so long.
You must have taken this news to heart. You'd know
where they are who have brought it here to Mycenae.

ELECTRA

Yes, I know where they are. How could I not?

AEGISTHUS

And? Tell me!

ELECTRA

Inside where they have found a receptive hostess.

AEGISTHUS

And did they really say that Orestes was dead?

ELECTRA

They said it and then proved it.

AEGISTHUS

Proof one can see
and touch?

ELECTRA

Yes. And it is not a happy thing.

AEGISTHUS

Your words have brought me pleasure—a rare thing.

ELECTRA

If anyone can be pleased by such a report.

AEGISTHUS

Open the doors that all of Mycenae may see
and those who were hoping he would come back someday
can see he is dead. Then, having no choice,
no hope for anything else, they will accept me
without the punishments I have been meting out.

ELECTRA

As you see, even I have learned
what common sense tells everyone—to yield
to those who wield the power.

(*The doors of the palace open to reveal a covered bier. Orestes and Pylades are standing beside it.*)

AEGISTHUS

O Zeus! I thank you for this vision
of how your righteous anger works in the world.
Remove the cloth so I can see for myself
and lament my poor relation.

ORESTES
You should do this yourself. You are the one
who should look on this and speak your loving words.

AEGISTHUS
Your advice is sound. I'll do so. But Clytemnestra?
Where is she? Somewhere in the house?

ORESTES
She is here. You need not look elsewhere.

(*Aegisthus lifts the covering.*)

AEGISTHUS
What? What is this?

ORESTES
Do you not recognize her?

AEGISTHUS
Who are you? Into whose trap I have fallen?

ORESTES
Alive,
and yet you make witty talk to one who is dead.

AEGISTHUS
Oh. I take it that you are Orestes.

ORESTES
At last,
the penny drops. How could you not have seen it?

AEGISTHUS
Disaster! Ruin! May I yet speak one word?

ELECTRA
No, not another syllable, brother.
What can he possibly say? What good does it do
to delay for even a moment the death he has earned?
Kill him at once, and leave the body to those
who want to bury him—somewhere out of our sight.

ORESTES
She's right. We're beyond words. Go inside.

AEGISTHUS
Why inside? If it's a decent thing
you plan to do, then do it out here in the open,
not hidden away in criminal darkness.

ORESTES
Are you giving me orders? You do have nerve.
What I want is for you to go to the spot
where you murdered my father. That is where you'll die.

AEGISTHUS
Is it necessary that more blood
be shed in Pelops' cursed house?

ORESTES
Yes.
Yours, as a matter of fact. Go on inside.

AEGISTHUS
You plan to outdo your father.

ORESTES

You're wasting time.
Go, now.

AEGISTHUS

Lead the way.

ORESTES

No, after you.

AEGISTHUS

Do you suppose I'll try to run away?

ORESTES

Not really, no. But I want you to taste the gall
and bitterness of the end of what you did.
Punishment should be tailored to fit the crime.
That might give other malefactors pause.

(*Exit Aegisthus, followed by Orestes and Pylades.*)

FIRST CHORISTER

Orestes, scion of Atreus' suffering house,
you are set free at last by this day's events.

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Philoctetes

Characters:

ODYSSEUS (emissary from the Greeks at Troy)

NEOPTOLEMUS (son of Achilles)

CHORUS OF SAILORS

PHILOCTETES (Greek chieftain left behind on the voyage to Troy)

MERCHANT

HERACLES

(*An area on Lemnos, an uninhabited island, with a cliff in the background in which we can see the entrance to Philoctetes' cave.*)

(*Enter Odysseus and Neoptolemus, with a scout.*)

ODYSSEUS
This is it, Lemnos, the deserted
island of the kind we talk about.
No house or hut or any sign of life.
It was here that I put Philoctetes ashore
years ago, as I'd been commanded to do.
He had that festering sore on his foot that dripped
and, if you will pardon the observation,
stank. It also caused him terrible pain
and he shouted and screamed in his agony, day and night.
Unpleasant for us, but worse, of evil omen,
which is why they had to make their hard decision.
Most of this you know or have heard from your father
Achilles, who must have told you all about it.
The point is that I was the one who left him,
and therefore I am the last man in the world
Philoctetes would want to see. Don't let him
know I am here. Your task is to help
so that my scheme to take him captive can work.
You see the mouth of the cave—or one of its mouths.
There almost surely is another somewhere.
And below it you can just make out a spring
from which he gets his drinking water. You see it?

(*Neoptolemus climbs up to look into the mouth of the cave.*)

NEOPTOLEMUS
Yes, I am at the cave.

ODYSSEUS

You hear anything?

NEOPTOLEMUS

No, nothing at all. Nobody's home.

ODYSSEUS

He could be asleep. So you will want to be careful.
Any sign inside that somebody lives there?

NEOPTOLEMUS

There's a bed, or pressed-down leaves someone could sleep on.

ODYSSEUS

Anything else, more persuasive than leaves?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Oh! There's a kind of cup, not very well made.
And I see a circle of stones that could be for a fire.

ODYSSEUS

And that's his whole treasure?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I see some rags.
They are hanging up to dry but still show stains—
I'd guess they're from that nasty wound in his foot.

ODYSSEUS

This has to be where he lives. And being lame,
he can't have gone far. He's looking for food
or maybe trying to find some helpful herb.
Send the man with you to look for him.

The last thing we want is for him to find me.
He hates me more than any Argive.

(*Neoptolemus descends. Scout exits.*)

NEOPTOLEMUS
He's on his way. He'll keep his eyes peeled.
If you want anything else, just let me know.

ODYSSEUS
Son of Achilles, this is a difficult mission
and vital, and it requires of you a courage
not merely of body but also of mind.
What I am about to tell you, you may find
new and disturbing, but you must give me your help—
that, after all, is what you are here to do.

NEOPTOLEMUS
What do you want?

ODYSSEUS
To cloud Philoctetes' mind
with the words you speak. He will ask you who you are,
and you will tell him, "Neoptolemus,
the son of Achilles." You don't have to hide that.
You will tell him you are sailing home from Troy
because of the hatred that has arisen in you
for all the Achaeans—because they refused to give you
your father's armor. Tell him that this was awarded
instead to Odysseus, and then you can add insults
and say what a low and crafty fellow I am,
whatever you can think of. It won't bother me,
but if you fail to do this and cannot win
his trust, then you will be the cause of grief

for all of us. Unless we can win his bow,
we can never succeed in conquering the Trojans.
I cannot undertake this business myself,
but you can, because when you joined in,
you were not a part of that first expedition,
and you were not compelled and swore no oaths.
I can't claim any of these things.
If he catches sight of me while he has his bow,
then I am a dead man, as you will be too,
and all our companions here. The invincible weapon
we need and have to steal, which is my scheme.
It is not your nature to lie, or plot, or use words
to deceive other men. You much prefer, I know,
if you want a weapon to win it by your valor.
But sometimes you have to swallow your pride and honor.
In the long run you will see that I was right
and that this was the only way to do it. Trust me!
And give me a few hours of shamelessness.
Once we are done here, you can lead your life
of honor and be the most truthful man alive.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Son of Laertes, these deviations from truth
and honor I find exceedingly distasteful
even to hear about as they are proposed.
Let me get the weapon from him by force.
How can he fight with one foot disabled?
He is only one and we are many!
I was sent to help you but had no idea
that this was what you planned for us to do.
I should rather lose in honor than win
by means of treachery and the use of falsehoods.

ODYSSEUS
Son of a noble father, I salute you.
When I was young, my tongue was not a weapon.
I knew how to use my arm and that was all.
But I have learned over the years that words
are often stronger than deeds in human affairs.

NEOPTOLEMUS
It's a pretty way of saying that I should lie.

ODYSSEUS
Not pretty but it's what we have to do.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Why can't I simply try to persuade him?

ODYSSEUS
He'll never be persuaded, and force won't work.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Why on earth not?

ODYSSEUS
His inescapable
arrows always bring death.

NEOPTOLEMUS
How does one approach him?

ODYSSEUS
You do it the way I say, by the use of tricks.

NEOPTOLEMUS
That's a disgraceful thing to do, is it not?

ODYSSEUS
Not if it gets us what we came here for.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Won't he know that I am telling lies?

ODYSSEUS
Do it the way you fight—without hesitation!

NEOPTOLEMUS
And if I can get him to come to Troy, what then?

ODYSSEUS
His bow is the thing we need to take to Troy.

NEOPTOLEMUS
And I am not the one to capture the city?

ODYSSEUS
You cannot take the city without the bow,
but the bow can't take the city without you.

NEOPTOLEMUS
I understand then why the bow is important.

ODYSSEUS
Take it and you will win a double prize.

NEOPTOLEMUS
What prize? What prizes? Tell me and I shall act.

ODYSSEUS
Men will call you clever and also brave.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Enough talk. I shall do my shameless best.

ODYSSEUS
You remember my instructions?

NEOPTOLEMUS
I do, indeed.

ODYSSEUS
Then you stay here and wait for him to come back.
I'll go off so that he does not see me.
Send the scout back to the ship. I'll wait,
but if you seem to be taking too much time,
I'll send him back to you, disguised as a merchant.
He'll say what I tell him to, and you'll play along.
All right? I'm off. May Hermes give us his help
in this guileful business. And keen-eyed Athena
who always protects me, may she look after us, too.

(*Exit Odysseus with the scout. Enter Chorus of Neoptolemus' sailors.*)

FIRST CHORISTER
A foreigner in a foreign land,
how, my lord, am I to account for myself?
What can I say to put the man at his ease?
Tell me, for he is a shrewd fellow who has
the divine scepter of Zeus in his human hands.
You are in command, and therefore to you
we turn for our instructions. What must I do?

NEOPTOLEMUS
Wait and watch. We stand near where he lives.
Look on and wait for my signal. I will tell you

when to approach and suggest what you should say.
I do not know exactly what to expect
but hope that the moment may offer me suggestions.

SECOND CHORISTER
I'll keep my eye on you as I always have
and focus my thoughts on whatever you might need.
But let us know where he camps and show us where
to conceal ourselves, lest he surprise us,
appearing from some unexpected direction.

NEOPTOLEMUS
That opening on the cliff is the cave he sleeps in.

THIRD CHORISTER
And where has he gone now? What is he doing?

NEOPTOLEMUS
Probably searching for whatever food he can find.
I assume with those arrows of his he brings down beasts
on which he feeds. It must be a painful business
and there's no one here to ease his continual torment.

FIRST CHORISTER
It's a hard life he's leading, alone and in pain,
creeping from one moment's needs to the next.
How do the gods afflict defenseless mortals!
Consider this man, who comes from a noble house,
reduced to the bare existence of hairy beasts
and enduring his unbearable, incurable,
and even disgusting affliction, while ignored
by all but Echo who mocks cries from his soul.

NEOPTOLEMUS
None of this is news, I am sorry to say.
Philoctetes' present troubles arise
from the will of the offended goddess Chryse,
upon whose precincts he trespassed, and she
sent her viper to wound him in the foot.
As long as he and his irresistible weapon
are here, we cannot conquer the Trojan fortress.

SECOND CHORISTER
Wait! Be still.

NEOPTOLEMUS
What?

SECOND CHORISTER
I heard a noise.
It was faint but could have been a groan of pain
at some distance. There, I heard it again,
the cry of a man in distress. But coming closer.
I urge you, be as careful as you can.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Careful, of course. But in particular, how?

THIRD CHORISTER
He is not far from home, but he does not come
playing tunes on his pipe. No happy shepherd,
this is a man in pain and also angry,
having sighted our ship.
(*Offstage voice, crying out.*)
That wasn't a welcome.

(*Enter Philoctetes.*)

PHILOCTETES
Who are you, putting in at this dismal island
with no convenient anchorage and no
inhabitant but myself? From what nation
and from what family do you gentlemen come?
Your dress suggests to me that you are Greeks,
which would be pleasing, but I should like to hear this
from your mouths. Do not shrink in fear
of the wild man you see standing before you,
but rather take pity on him, alone, afflicted
and, if you come as friends, then do speak up.
I thirst for words and fervently wish to hear
and speak them, as I did in another life.

NEOPTOLEMUS
First, let me assure you that we are Greek,
which is what you most wished to learn from us.

PHILOCTETES
Ah, most welcome of noises—to be addressed
by a fellow Greek, in Greek, after so long.
What need or difficulty brought you here?
What kindly wind impelled you this way? Tell me
everything that I should know about you.

NEOPTOLEMUS
I was born on seagirt Skyros, and now
am homeward bound. I am Achilles' son,
Neoptolemus, and, after all, no stranger.

PHILOCTETES
You are the son of a great friend and you come
from a splendid island. Lycomedes' grandson,
if I recall correctly. From where do you sail
and what, if I may ask, is your present business?

NEOPTOLEMUS
I am on my way home from the war at Troy.

PHILOCTETES
I do not remember you at the first muster.
You were not among us back at the start.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Did you take part in that campaign?

PHILOCTETES
My son,
do you not know to whom you are now speaking?

NEOPTOLEMUS
I have never seen you before. How could I know?

PHILOCTETES
But you must have heard my name and my sorry story.

NEOPTOLEMUS
You have not told me your name or your story either.

PHILOCTETES
I am a man the gods must hate if the news
of how I suffer has not spread throughout Greece.
Those who sinned in abandoning me on this island
laugh at me, as my malady grows worse.

My son, Achilles' son, I am the man
who is master of Heracles' invincible weapons.
I am the son of Poas—Philoctetes,
whom Atreus' two sons and that Ithacan villain
left in this desolation to suffer alone
from the viper's deadly bite. They anchored here
and, when they saw that I had fallen asleep
in the pain I had undergone in the wave-tossed vessel,
put to sea in silence, leaving me nothing
to eat or drink—in a nightmare of evil to which
I awoke and in which I have lived from that moment on.
You cannot imagine my tears of sorrow and rage
and the realization that there was no one to hear me.
The ships and my shipmates were gone, and I
was left to suffer and, if I could, survive
with my insistent pain as my only companion.
The hours dragged on as I dragged myself on the ground
to try to forage for food, shooting birds
with the hero's bow and then crawling along
the rocky soil to find what I had brought down.
I discovered a spring to drink from. I contrived to strike
rock upon rock to bring the spark to life
from which I might kindle a fire and keep myself
warm and dry. I made a minimal life
that provided for my wants except for the cure
for my disease on this bitter and grudging island
to which nobody comes if he can help it.
No harbor, after all, and nothing to take
for trade. No hospitality. Sometimes
in bad weather a ship puts in here and men
take pity on me and leave me something to eat
and even some clothing, but no one's kindness extends
to taking me with them—because of my stinking wound.
For nine years I have endured this living

death, cold, hungry, and racked by pain.
This is what the sons of Atreus did
and the great Odysseus, whom I pray that the gods
may strike to the very heart for his heartlessness.

FIRST CHORISTER
Like those strangers who came here, I, too, feel
pity for your plight, son of Poas.

NEOPTOLEMUS
And I can agree with you about those men,
Odysseus and the sons of Atreus. Evil!

PHILOCTETES
You have a complaint about those brothers too?

NEOPTOLEMUS
I wish I could express my rage in a violence
that Sparta and Mycenae would understand.
Skyros is also the home of valiant men.

PHILOCTETES
Well said! I am happy to hear this. What is the cause
of the anger in your heart for those terrible brothers?

NEOPTOLEMUS
Much as it pains me to rehearse these things,
I will tell you, son of Poas, of the pain
I suffered at their hands. When Achilles was killed . . .

PHILOCTETES
Wait. Before you go on, is Achilles dead?

NEOPTOLEMUS
Yes, but not by a mortal's hand. They say
Apollo shot him with a deadly arrow.

PHOLOCTETES
Noble then is the slayer as well as the slain.
I want to hear your woes, but I want also
to mourn for the loss of such a singular hero.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Your own woes, dear man, are already sufficient.
You are not obliged to lament the griefs of others.

PHILOCTETES
You are right. But how did they insult you?

NEOPTOLEMUS
They came for me in a ship all decked with garlands
of brightly colored flowers to tell me the gods
required my presence, now that my father
was dead, if the Greeks were to take the towers of Troy.
I believed them, although now I know
it was merely a story they had concocted.
That's what Odysseus does: he prefers lies
even when the truth would be sufficient.
I went with them—never mind the gods.
I wanted to see my father before he was buried.
I had never laid my eyes upon him in life.
But what they said was not without its appeal,
and the honor of being the one to conquer Troy
was a splendid prospect. At last we reached Sigeum,
which is close to Troy, and the army came out to greet me.
There I saw him, laid out upon his bier
where I wept for the loss of a father I'd never known.

The sons of Atreus pretended friendship,
but when I asked them for my father's armor
they spoke their vile words I shall never forget—
that I might have whatever I liked of my father's
possessions, but not his armor, which now belonged
to Odysseus, who was standing not far away.
I burst into tears of an anger that I believe
was altogether righteous and asked how could they
dare do such a thing. Odysseus told me,
"Yes, boy, they were right to give me the armor,
for I was there with him and saved his body
and armor too." This meant nothing to me
and I assailed him with insults in my fury
that I could be deprived of what should be mine.
Most of the time he is too shrewd to admit
what he is thinking, but he was annoyed enough
to tell me bluntly, "You were not where we were.
You were far away, not helping at all
as you ought to have been. And now you arrive to speak
vanities with a reckless tongue. Believe me,
you shall not return to Skyros with this armor."
Hearing myself insulted in that way,
I decided that I was not obliged to endure
such incivility. I returned to my ship
to sail for home, even without the armor
that wicked Odysseus would not return to me.
That is my story, and anyone who despises
the Ithacan thug as I do is my friend,
as anyone is who hates Atreus' sons.

FIRST CHORISTER
Earth-goddess, mother of Zeus,
ruler of mountains, giver of gold
from Pactolus' waters, I call on you now

to correct the unbearable insolence
of Atreus' sons to Achilles' son.

SECOND CHORISTER
Chastise those brothers as you upbraid
with the power of your bull-slaughtering lions
Laertes' wily son, Odysseus.

PHILOCTETES
You have sailed here, strangers, with a congruent pain
that commends you and is in harmony with mine.
What you say of your enemies I know
as true to my own bitter experience.
Odysseus' tongue is that of a viper and drips
the poison of lies. But explain to me one thing
that troubles my mind. Where in all this was Ajax?

NEOPTOLEMUS
Had he been still alive, those arms I wanted
never could have been wrested away from me.

PHILOCTETES
What are you saying? Ajax is dead, too?

NEOPTOLEMUS
He is no longer in the world of light.

PHILOCTETES
That is sad news. But Diomedes, I fear,
will never die, nor will that cuckoo bastard
Odysseus, whom Sisyphus begat
on Anticleia on the wrong side of the bed.
They stain the light of which Ajax is deprived.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Both are alive and well, I am sorry to say.

PHILOCTETES
And Nestor of Pylos? Is he alive and breathing?
He might have dissuaded them from their evil.

NEOPTOLEMUS
He lives but is burdened by grief at having lost
his dear son Antilochus who is gone.

PHILOCTETES
How is it that the good perish and leave
the evil ones behind who should have gone first?

NEOPTOLEMUS
Odysseus is cunning, but even the cleverest plans
sometimes go wrong. That is something to hope for.

PHILOCTETES
What about Patroclus, who was your father's
close companion? Had he nothing to say?

NEOPTOLEMUS
He too is dead. It seems that the god of war
prefers to destroy the noble and spare villains.

PHILOCTETES
I must agree. Surely, it does seem so.
But let me ask you about another unworthy
but cunning man, and whether he still lives.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Other than Odysseus? Whom do you mean?

PHILOCTETES
The guttersnipe Thersites, who always said
the worst possible thing at the worst time.

NEOPTOLEMUS
I did not encounter him and cannot say.

PHILOCTETES
If the rule holds, then he would be doing well,
being too wicked to die or to be allowed
into Hades' precincts. I'm driven to think
that the gods, being immortal, are also evil.

NEOPTOLEMUS
For my part I mean to travel as far
from Ilium as I can where the worse men
hold power while the better perish, where cowards
thrive and lord it over the brave. In disgust
I shall return to Skyros' rocky shores
for which I long and with which I shall be content.
I go now to my ship and, son of Poas,
I bid you a farewell. May the gods be kind
and relieve you of your sickness and its pain.
The wind is fair, and I must take my leave
in the hope of the easy voyage sailors pray for.

PHILOCTETES
You are leaving already, my son?

NEOPTOLEMUS

I fear we must.
Men set their course from where they find themselves.

PHILOCTETES

But by your father and mother, my lad, by whatever
you may hold dear in life, I do implore you
not to abandon me here alone like this
amid such tribulations as you see
and others that you can imagine. Take me with you,
despite my stinking wound. Put up with me.
A noble man would do this. A generous action
merits eternal fame! If you neglect me
and shun your duty, that will bring discredit
on you and your house, while all men's admiration
will surely be yours for doing the decent thing
if I should manage to reach Oeta alive.
How long after all will your discomfort last?
A day or two? You can put up with it. Stow me
wherever you like, on the prow or back at the stern,
wherever I am least likely to cause distress
to your shipmates. I beg, in the name of Zeus,
who is the mighty god of suppliants,
do me this kindness. I fall on my knees before you.
My helplessness is my advocate! My lameness
argues on my behalf. Do not leave me here
in my pain, alone, away from the world of men!
Take me home with you, or drop me off
at Chalcedon in Euboea, which is not far
from Oeta, the ridge of Trachis, and the flowing
waters of Spercheus—and my father,
whom I have longed to see while he still lives.
By those few who have stopped here, I have sent
messages home asking that he should come

to fetch me. But either they never reached him,
the messengers having ignored their solemn promise,
or else they arrived to find that he was dead.
But instead of a message, you can deliver myself,
performing an act of piety and pity.
Remember how men's fortunes change and reversals
are always in wait to correct us—arrogant men
are brought low, while those who have given up hope
are also reproved as the fickle gods show mercy.

THIRD CHORISTER
Take pity on him, my lord.
His troubles speak for him
and woes of the kind I wish
may never touch me or mine.

SECOND CHORISTER
You hate Atreus' sons.
Reverse their cruel deed
with your demonstration of kindness.

FIRST CHORISTER
Take him with you, take him
home, where he longs to go,
on your well-rigged, swift ship.
Do not risk the anger
of the just and all-seeing gods.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Pointing out the right thing to do is easy,
but will your preference change after only a little
intimacy with his sickness and foul smell?

FIRST CHORISTER
Not at all. You have no reason to charge us
with failure even before we have been tested!

NEOPTOLEMUS
In that case, what can I say? It would be shameful
for me to seem less ready to meet his needs
than you are. Let us therefore prepare to sail.
The ship itself will have no objection to make.
Let us, with the gods' approval, depart
and take this most unfortunate man with us.

PHILOCTETES
I have long prayed for this day and for such a man
as you are to come along and take me hence.
I have no way to demonstrate the friendship
I feel in my heart for each of you. My son,
let me show you the place in which I lived,
that home that was not a home, that squalid cave
I managed with courage and sheer will to make
into a kind of dwelling. See for yourself
and you will understand how much I owe you
and therefore imagine the depth of my gratitude.

FIRST CHORISTER
But wait, wait! Two men are approaching us,
one of our crew and another man, a stranger.
Before you visit the cave, hear what they say.

(*Enter the scout, who is pretending to be a merchant, accompanied by a sailor. Neoptolemus advances toward the merchant to speak with him privately.*)

MERCHANT
Son of Achilles, I asked my companion here,
one of your crew you left to guard your ship,
to show me where you are. I happened to anchor
in the same place as you did on my way
from Troy to Skopelos to pick up grapes.
When I learned whose ship it was, I saw my chance
to do both of us some good by giving you warning—
or not giving but trading, for I am a trader—
of the plans that your fellow Argives have for you.
More than plans, I should say, for by this time
they have turned, there can be no doubt, into actions.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Stranger, I am a fair-minded man,
and I shall reciprocate the kindness you do me
with tokens of my significant gratitude.
What actions do you speak of? Let me learn
in order that I may know how best to prepare.

MERCHANT
They are coming after you, Theseus' sons
and Phoenix, your late father's aged tutor.

NEOPTOLEMUS
To bring me back, I assume. By using force?
Or do they merely mean to try to persuade me?

MERCHANT
On that question, I have no information.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Is it Phoenix' idea to try to please
the sons of Atreus?

MERCHANT

What is in their minds
I cannot guess. But they have already set out,
leaving the matter of their intention behind them.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I do not doubt you, but I do wonder why
Odysseus was not part of the delegation.

MESSENGER

He and Diomedes, I do believe,
were occupied in tracking down someone else.

NEOPTOLEMUS

And whom were they going after?

MERCHANT

I believe it was . . .
But who is this man? Quietly, tell me his name.

NEOPTOLEMUS

This is the famous Philoctetes.

MESSENGER

Really?
You must make haste. As soon as possible, sail.
Get away from this island while you still can.

PHILOCTETES

What are you two talking about in private?
Can you include me in your conversation?

NEOPTOLEMUS
I am yet to discover what he is saying,
but let him say it openly to you
and me and the men.
(*to merchant*)
You were about to say?

MERCHANT
First, I beg you not to inform on me
or let the Argive army know that I told you
what they may have intended to keep secret.
I have done a number of things for them
for which I have been paid—although not well.

NEOPTOLEMUS
I am their enemy and this man here
hates them, which is what makes him my friend.
You come to do me a service? Conceal nothing
but tell me what things you have been able to hear.

MERCHANT
This is dangerous business, young man. You know that.

NEOPTOLEMUS
I am always careful.

MERCHANT
I'm glad to hear it.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Go ahead, then, trust me and speak up.

MERCHANT

I will. It is for this man here that Odysseus
and mighty Diomedes have set out
and whom they have both sworn to bring back to Troy—
by persuasion if that is possible but if not
then by force. All the Achaeans heard him,
for the Ithacan seemed surer of himself
than Tydeus' son. That's what I have to tell.

NEOPTOLEMUS

But why, after all this time has passed? Why now
do they take such trouble for someone they themselves
cast away on this island? What is their reason
for wanting or needing him now? Do the angry gods
punish them now for what they did years ago?

MERCHANT

I will explain what you may not have known
about their reason for needing him. Helenus,
one of Priam's sons, is a gifted prophet.
He ventured out late one night and Odysseus
fell upon him, took him captive, and dragged him
as a prize into the camp for interrogation.
Helenus there said that the Greeks would never
take Troy unless they brought Philoctetes
back from the island where he has been living.
Odysseus, when he heard this, volunteered
to fetch Philoctetes, either by persuasion
or else, if that could not be managed, by force.
He then announced before the gathered host
that, if he failed, anyone who wished to
could cut off his head. Does that answer your question?
My advice would be to leave at once.

PHILOCTETES
That living plague! Did he make such a boast?
I should be no more eager to return
to the Greeks at Troy than Sisyphus was happy,
after he had escaped, to return to Hades.

MERCHANT
I've given you my news and my advice.
I shall return to my ship, and may god help you.

(*Exit Merchant.*)

PHILOCTETES
Can you believe this? He expects his honeyed
words, not one of which has a grain of truth,
to beguile me so that I go back to Troy
where he can show me off to the camp as a trophy.
I hate him even more than I hate the serpent
that wounded my foot back in the goddess's grove.
Nothing is beyond him or beneath him
and he will say or do whatever it takes
to achieve his purpose. But I know he is coming
and have, at least for the moment, that advantage.
Let us leave at once and rely on the sea
and its wide expanse to protect us from his ship.
We can eat and sleep later on. For now
we must hurry to save our lives if we can.

NEOPTOLEMUS
As soon as the wind changes, we're on our way.

PHILOCTETES.
When one is escaping from trouble any wind
is favorable. We'll go wherever it takes us.

NEOPTOLEMUS
If it's wrong for us, then it's wrong for Odysseus, too.

PHILOCTETES
If you're a pirate, no wind is so adverse
as to keep you from robbing, killing, and kidnapping.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Very well. If that is your wish. Take
whatever you want or need, and we shall go.

PHILOCTETES
There isn't much, but there are some things I'll want.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Things that I don't already have on board?

PHILOCTETES
I have an herb I use to dull the pain.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Go and get it. What else is there?

PHILOCTETES
My arrows.
I may have dropped a few that I wouldn't want
anyone else to pick up for himself.

NEOPTOLEMUS
And Heracles' bow? Is that what's in your hand?

PHILOCTETES
I have no other. This is the famous bow.

NEOPTOLEMUS
May I see it? Or even hold it, to kiss
as if it were the relic of a god?

PHILOCTETES
For you? There is no favor I would not grant.

NEOPTOLEMUS
It would be an honor. But only if you are willing.
If it is wrong for me to touch it, I won't.

PHILOCTETES
How can I refuse when you ask with words
so modest and deferential both to me
and also the weapon? Through you alone can I hope
to see the sunrise on Oeta, to embrace my father,
and greet my friends. I lay in utter ruin
but you were the one to raise me up again
beyond my enemies' reach. Yes, you may hold it
and, when you have returned it, forever boast
that you alone among mortals have touched
this godly weapon. Indeed, it was for a kindness
that I acquired it from Heracles.

(*Neoptolemus takes the bow, holds it for a moment, and returns it.*)

NEOPTOLEMUS
It is an honor of course to hold the bow
but the greater honor is to have met you
and to have become your friend. Mutual kindness
between friends is greater than any possession.

PHILOCTETES
Come inside with me. My wound is such
that it would be helpful to have someone to lean on.

(*Exeunt Philoctetes and Neoptolemus into the cave.*)

FIRST CHORISTER
None of us has seen it,
but we have heard how Ixion approached
the gods' marriage bed lusting for Hera.
For this, Chronos' son
bound him on the fiery wheel
that spins forever.

SECOND CHORISTER
But what has this man done?
What sin deserved this punishment,
protracted year after year,
of unrelenting pain?

THIRD CHORISTER
How did he endure
the sighing of the inconsolable waves
breaking upon the shingle?
Who was here to share
his endless lamentations
or lull him to sleep
with soothing, compassionate words?

FIRST CHORISTER
Who was there to bring
the soothing herbs
or rags for the constant ooze
of yellow-green pus?

When the spasms abated
he had to crawl like an infant
for food and water
while his mind wavered
in rage and anguish.

SECOND CHORISTER
With no dependable crops,
no beasts in pens
that ease the lives of men,
he had to grub in the dirt
for edible roots
or shoot at the birds
crisscrossing the sky.

THIRD CHORISTER
For ten long years
no sip from a cup of wine.
Only the standing water
in puddles the rain had left.

FIRST CHORISTER
But now comes a noble man
through whom he will attain
his faint and guttering dream.
A swift ship will bring him
over the wide sea
to Spercheus' banks
where the happy naiads play
and the great man with the bronze shield
ascended from the heights of Oeta
in a blazing apotheosis.

(*Enter Philoctetes and Neoptolemus. After a few steps Philoctetes stops.*)

NEOPTOLEMUS
What is wrong? You stand there, motionless,
speechless. . . . What has happened to you?

PHILOCTETES
Aaaaah!

NEOPTOLEMUS
What is the matter? What can I do?

PHILOCTETES
Aaaaah!
Do not be afraid. It will pass. It always does.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Is it your sickness?

PHILOCTETES
Yes, it comes and goes.
It will get better. Oh gods! Aaaaah!

NEOPTOLEMUS
Why do you call on the gods?

PHILOCTETES
For mercy. And after a while they'll hear me.

NEOPTOLEMUS
It's your foot from the viper's bite? That wound?
It's a terrible thing.

PHILOCTETES
Yes, it is. Excuse me.
I cannot conceal my pain. It shoots through me. . . .

I am lost, utterly vanquished. Aaaaah!
For god's sake, if you have a sword,
cut off my foot! Let it be over with.
If it kills me, I shall still be better off.
Oh, gods! Help me, my friend. Help me.

NEOPTOLEMUS
You weren't like this a little while ago.
What has happened to give you this sudden pain?

PHILOCTETES
The pain abates and suddenly returns.

NEOPTOLEMUS
I don't understand . . .

PHILOCTETES
What is there to understand?

NEOPTOLEMUS
I'm sorry. It is shocking to see you this way.

PHILOCTETES
Shocking and indescribable. Have pity!

NEOPTOLEMUS
What can I do?

PHILOCTETES
Do not give in to your fright
or let your disgust change your mind and heart.
This comes at a terrible time, which is not surprising.
It is a vengeful and evil thing. It abates
only to pounce upon me again more fiercely.

NEOPTOLEMUS
How horrible for you. Do you want me to hold you?
Would that make the agony easier to bear?

PHILOCTETES
No, it isn't that. But take my bow
and guard it until the pain eases a little.
I'll probably pass out. That often happens.
Let me sleep it off, but if those people come
that the merchant spoke of, I beg you to protect it
and do not allow them to take it away from you,
for if you do, it could mean my death
and yours as well. Do me this kindness, I beg you
as a friend that you say I am and a suppliant.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Have no doubt, I shall take good care
that no one but you and me shall lay a hand
on the sacred bow. I promise. Give it to me.

PHILOCTETES
Here, take it. And kiss it, lest it bring you
trouble, as it brought great trouble to me
as well as the one who had it before me.

NEOPTOLEMUS (*kisses the bow*)
O gods, grant this to me: hold me harmless
and prosper our voyage to take us where we should go.

PHILOCTETES
Aaaaaah!
I am afraid that your prayer may not be heard.
The dark blood is oozing again from the wound.
My foot is telling me that wickedness

approaches ever closer. The pain warns
of other kinds of pain. You know what I mean?
Do not run off, I beg you. Oh, the pain.
If only I could somehow redirect it
into Odysseus' black and corrupted heart!
Oh, it's a stabbing pain, much worse
than the viper's bite. And let those vile Atreides
feel it too, let them have this sickness
so that they pray for death to come, as I do
every day, and in vain, always in vain.
For the gods' sake, boy, kill me
as I killed Heracles who begged me to do it
and got that weapon you are holding now.
You say nothing! Why are you silent? Speak!

NEOPTOLEMUS
What can I say? I am in agony, too,
witnessing your pain that I lament.

PHILOCTETES
It comes on all of a sudden but then it goes
almost as quickly. Don't be afraid. Hang on
only a little longer. I'll be all right.
Just stay here. Please, don't leave me alone.

NEOPTOLEMUS
We'll stay! We'll stay.

PHILOCTETES
Will you?

NEOPTOLEMUS
Yes, I promise.

PHILOCTETES
I did not mean to ask you to swear an oath.

NEOPTOLEMUS
It would not be right for me to go without you.

PHILOCTETES
Aaaah! Give me your hand as a pledge.

NEOPTOLEMUS (*giving his hand to Philoctetes and holding it*)
I pledge that I will stay.

PHILOCTETES
Up there! Up there!

NEOPTOLEMUS
What's up there?

PHILOCTETES
High above! Up there!

NEOPTOLEMUS
Where? Are you delirious again?

PHILOCTETES
Let me go!

NEOPTOLEMUS
Let you go where?

PHILOCTETES
Let go of me.

NEOPTOLEMUS
No, I won't.

PHILOCTETES (*pulls his hand away*)
Aaaah!
If you touch me, you will kill me!

NEOPTOLEMUS
All right, all right.

PHILOCTETES
O Earth, receive me. Take me now
just as I am. I can't stand up any longer.

(*He collapses and falls to the ground.*)

NEOPTOLEMUS
His head falls backwards. He seems to be unconscious.
This is the sleep he spoke of. And a sweat
pours from his body. His heel is oozing blood.
Come, friends, let us leave him in peace.

FIRST CHORISTER
Sleep that knows nothing
of misery or of pain,
attend us now,
bringing with your delicate breath
the blessings in life that come with death.

SECOND CHORISTER
Come, healer,
cover his eyes
and shield them from the brightness
of daylight skies.

THIRD CHORISTER
We should act now and without delay.
Examine your heart! Have you persuaded yourself?
For the aim we seek, this is the time for daring.
The opportune moment has come and is slipping away.

NEOPTOLEMUS
We could capture the bow now, but it may be in vain.
The prophet's words were clear enough—that he
himself was necessary for us to win.
Bad enough to utter a series of falsehoods,
but worse if we then fail to achieve our purpose.

FIRST CHORISTER
What we attempt
and whether we then win
is in the hands of the gods
who sometimes reward sin.

SECOND CHORISTER
Whisper in my ear,
for a sleeper's closed eyes can see
waking shapes that appear
in dreams and he also may be
hearing the words we say
and the thoughts they convey.

THIRD CHORISTER
But he cannot act, as we can to accomplish
our purpose undetected. This is the time
to do what we came for, while he is asleep,
but you fail to act and this is strange, indeed.
He cannot move hand or foot, and the wind is right

for us to commit ourselves. What are your orders?
Fearless action is likeliest to succeed.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Hush! Get hold of yourself. The man is moving
his head. His eyelids flutter. He's waking up.

PHILOCTETES
I see the light, and I am reassured
to find that you have kept your word, kept watch
during my time of tribulation, and have not
abandoned me as the sons of Atreus did.
Your ancestors are noble as is your nature,
and you have been gracious and suffered through my cries
and my evil smell. But the pain has begun to recede.
Help me stand up. My strength will soon return
and we can make haste to the ship and commence our voyage.

NEOPTOLEMUS
I am happy to see you restored and no longer in pain.
We were worried that you might be at death's door.
But here you are, still. I'll help you up.
Or, if you prefer it, some of my men
can carry you down to the ship if it's too hard to walk.

PHILOCTETES
Thank you, my son. Help me up yourself.
I'd rather not impose my terrible smell
on any of them, for whom the odor will be
trouble enough when we have gone aboard.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Just as you say. Here, take hold of my arm.

(*Neoptolemus helps Philoctetes to his feet.*)

PHILOCTETES
Don't worry. Aside from the foot, I am all right.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Oh, god! What do I do now? Send me a sign!

PHILOCTETES
What's the matter? What troubles you now? Explain.

NEOPTOLEMUS
I am perplexed and don't know which way to turn.

PHILOCTETES
I don't understand. I worry to hear such talk.

NEOPTOLEMUS
I have come at last to the point where I must decide.

PHILOCTETES
Decide what? The stink of my foot is too much?
You have second thoughts about taking me aboard?

NEOPTOLEMUS
I'm having second thoughts about being a traitor
and liar, which I shall be, one way or another.

PHILOCTETES
You have not lied or betrayed. You have been noble . . .

NEOPTOLEMUS
That was exactly what you were supposed to believe.

PHILOCTETES
You have acted well, at least so far, but your words
are ominous and disturbing. What do you mean?

NEOPTOLEMUS
For a change, I shall speak clearly, hiding nothing.
You must now sail to Troy to aid the Achaeans.

PHILOCTETES
What are you talking about? I don't understand.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Do not lament before you have heard it all.

PHILOCTETES
What else is there to hear? What do you mean?

NEOPTOLEMUS
I'm trying to save you, but we must go to Troy.

PHILOCTETES
And this is why you came? All the rest
was a calculated fiction?

NEOPTOLEMUS
I had no choice.
Do not be angry with me . . .

PHILOCTETES
I am betrayed.
You lied to me. Give me back the bow.

NEOPTOLEMUS
I can't. I am under orders and have to obey.

PHILOCTETES
You snake! You hateful master of villainy!
What have you done to me? You gained my trust
only to take advantage of me. What worse
can a man do to a man? I went down on my knees
as a suppliant, and you took an oath. And now
you do not even have the minimal grace
to be ashamed. You have my bow. And my life!
Give it back. By the gods of your fathers, I beg you
not to deprive me of life. *Omoi!* And look!
He just stands there, not saying a word,
looking away from me and from what he has done!
I think of the harbors and shoreline promontories,
the look of the jagged rocks of the mountain peaks,
and all the landmarks among which I grew up,
and to them I call out in complaint. Who else will hear me?
The vile son of Achilles promised to take me
back to them and gave his hand as a pledge.
But words mean nothing. Wickedness can say
whatever may suit the moment but it lasts
only for that moment. Then and now
no longer have any connection. He has the bow
Heracles gave me, the son of mighty Zeus.
He means to display me before the Argive host
as if I were some champion he had beaten
in a fair fight. But I am a corpse, a ghost,
a mere phantom he has managed to trick.
Had I not been disabled, he would have had
no chance. Even now, in my helplessness,
he had no way to win except by lies.
I have been deceived, betrayed, abused. . . .
Give it back. It is not too late! You stand there
as dumb as a stone, as if you had been transformed.
But you can return to yourself and be what you were. . . .

Do you not feel some pang of bitter remorse?
You say nothing, as if I am nothing.
I go back to my cave. Without the bow.
Without the birds, I shall have nothing to eat,
and I shall wither away in my hole here,
making do with roots and grubs until
I die at last to become food for my prey.
Fair enough. Blood for blood, as they say.
Do you repent? Do you remember yourself?
If not, I pray that you die the disgraceful death
that your actions today have earned you, you son of a bitch!

FIRST CHORISTER
What are we to do? It is up to you.
Do we set sail? Do we listen to this man's words?

NEOPTOLEMUS
I feel for this man. I do, and not just now
but I have from the first moments of our encounter.

PHILOCTETES
Have pity on me, but think of yourself, too.
Do you want men to think of you as a liar?

NEOPTOLEMUS
What do I do? I wish I had never left
Skyros to founder here in this indecision.

PHILOCTETES
You are not a villain, my lad. But you were sent
by arch villains. Give them back their due
in villainy and give me back my bow.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Neither way is acceptable.

(*Enter Odysseus with two sailors in attendance.*)

ODYSSEUS
Scoundrel! Fool!
What in hell do you think you are doing? The bow!
Hand it over to me at once, do you hear?

PHILOCTETES
Who is this man? Can it be? Odysseus?

ODYSSEUS
Yes, I am Odysseus, standing before you.

PHILOCTETES
You captured me. You took Heracles' bow.

ODYSSEUS
I admit it. I claim it. Am proud of it.

PHILOCTETES
Neoptolemus, give me back my bow.

ODYSSEUS
He'll never do that. Even if he wants to.
And you will come with it, or we'll bring you by force.

PHILOCTETES
You see how sick I am, and you'll use force?

ODYSSEUS
If you refuse to come of your own free will.

PHILOCTETES
Hephestos, god of this island, will you allow this?

ODYSSEUS
It is Zeus who has decided this. I merely
execute his will.

PHILOCTETES
You hateful creature,
how can you pronounce such sacrilege?
You make the gods liars, just like yourself.

ODYSSEUS
I speak the truth, as the gods do, too. You'll see.

PHILOCTETES
I say No.

ODYSSEUS
I hear you, but I say Yes.
And you must yield to me.

PHILOCTETES
Am I a slave?

ODYSSEUS
No, it is as a free man you will come,
as a peer of the other chieftains, to take Troy.

PHILOCTETES
Never. Not so long as this high cliff
affords me a way of avoiding what you compel.

(*He moves toward the wings where, presumably, there is a cliff.*)

ODYSSEUS
What do you mean to do?

PHILOCTETES
Throw myself off
and break my skull on the rocks that wait below.

ODYSSEUS
Stop him. Seize him. Do not let him do this.

(*Two sailors grab Philoctetes.*)

PHILOCTETES
Without the bow, my arms are useless things,
pinioned thus by this wicked man's command.
(*to Odysseus*)
You worm without a decent thought in your head,
you have crept up on me as that viper did,
using this innocent boy whom I did not know
to hide behind, and thus you deceived me
and at the same time corrupted him.
For him, the right and wrong of obeying orders
is blurred forever, as I suppose it must be
in a tainted world. He realizes his crime
and suffers, both for himself and also for me—
and your evil mind is delighted by this twofold
treachery. He was an unwilling pupil,
but you are all the more satisfied with him
seeing how deeply he has been corrupted.
And now you mean to bind me and carry me off
from this shore on which you once left me to die,
deserted, bereft of all human connection,
a corpse that had not found its way to Hades.
I have often prayed for your death, but here we stand

glaring at each other, and I am pained
that you are alive and that I, too, am alive
to be mocked by you and Atreus' proud brats
whose impious orders you are pleased to obey.
You, they had to press and carry away,
but I volunteered and with my seven ships
joined at the beginning until you
(as they say) or they (as you maintain)
forced me to debark and left me here
helpless, sick, and dishonored. What has changed?
You need me now, of whom you have not thought
for all these years, and who might as well have died.
Am I not still lame and evil smelling?
Will my presence no longer ruin the rites
of sacrifice and libation? Has anything changed?
For what you did to this young man today,
if the gods have any care for justice, you
deserve to die a miserable death.
For me, I know why you come—some man of god
has told you that my miserable person
is necessary for your collective success.
Let the gods wreak vengeance and punish them
one and all, first to last, for this vile
treachery. If the gods ever feel pity,
ruin them, or, better, let me behold
their utter failure and gladden my sad heart.

FIRST CHORISTER
Bitter is the speech of this man, Odysseus.
He does not give way before his troubles.

ODYSSEUS
There is much I could say to answer him, but time
does not permit—except for one observation,

that when the occasion requires some deviousness,
I am the right man; but then, if the moment
allows for honor and valor, I can do that
as well as any. What always governs my actions
is a keen and focused desire for victory.
But let him loose. We have no need of him now.
We have the bow and the arrows that Teucer can handle
as I can, myself. What's hard about aiming arrows?
We leave you here on Lemnos and wish you well.
We shall depart. Perhaps at Troy I will earn
these weapons as my prize you could have kept.

PHILOCTETES
What am I to do? How horrid to think
of you flaunting my weapons among the Argives!

ODYSSEUS
This conversation is over. I'm on my way.

PHILOCTETES
And you, son of Achilles, have nothing to say?

ODYSSEUS (*to Neoptolemus*)
Come with me. Don't even look at him.
That nobility of yours will ruin our luck.

PHILOCTETES (*to the Chorus*)
And you? Will you leave me here? Have you no pity?

SECOND CHORISTER
The young man is our captain. Whatever he says,
that is what we also have to say.

NEOPTOLEMUS (*to Chorus*)
Odysseus will say that I am soft, but stay here
while we prepare to sail and say our prayers.
Perhaps Philoctetes may have a change of heart
and after all decide to come with us.
But in any case, come as soon as we call you.

(*Exeunt Odysseus and Neoptolemus.*)

PHILOCTETES
O horrible hole in the wall,
I had my hopes
that I might leave you.
But here I am to endure
your summer heat and winter cold
until I die sprawled on that bed of leaves.
O gods! How shall I feed myself?
Those birds that had learned to fear me
will no longer have to worry
but now can exult.

FIRST CHORISTER
This is the awful fate that you have chosen.
You could have shown good judgment and your condition
would have been quite different. What can we say
to one who has persisted in choosing badly?

PHILOCTETES
I seethe with anger. I taste
the bitterness of fear,
for how shall I live without my weapons?
The deceitful words of a cunning mind
undid me and all I can do as I languish here
is wish for him the same protracted decline.

SECOND CHORISTER
We had no hand in this. It comes from the gods.
There may have been treachery once, but now you have seen
the facts as they are and have chosen even so
the sad end you describe. It pains us to see this.

PHILOCTETES
Somewhere down on the shore
he sits and gloats,
brandishing the weapon that is not his
and that I had been using to feed myself.
How can my bow bear to be held in the hand
of one who has been deceitful?
Heracles' bow in the sweaty grasp
of that conniver, no better than any
opponent he may happen to face?
He obtained the weapon shamefully:
whatever he does with it will carry that shame.

THIRD CHORISTER
To heap insults upon him gets you nowhere.
He was doing what he had been ordered to do.

PHILOCTETES
O flying and creeping beasts
you are safe from my arrows now.
Come whenever you please.
I am lame and am easy prey
for your mouths to take revenge.
I will abandon life, for how should I live?
I cannot feed on the wind but need
what the life-giving earth provides.

FIRST CHORISTER
It is still in your power to change this dismal fate.
Approach your friend. He is as loyal to you
as the pain you have lived with so long and have come to trust.
Turn your back on suffering while you can.

PHILOCTETES
Pain has been my companion,
a part of myself, and you try
to help me turn away.
Why do you do this?

SECOND CHORISTER
Why do you say this?

PHILOCTETES
You wanted to take me to Troy's detestable shore.

THIRD CHORISTER
That, I think, is best.

PHILOCTETES
Go, then. All of you, go.

FIRST CHORISTER
The words you say are welcome. Now, guiltless,
we can leave you and go to our posts on board.

(*Chorus makes to leave.*)

PHILOCTETES
No, wait, by Zeus, I implore you!

SECOND CHORISTER
What? Why? What do you want now?

PHILOCTETES
Stay, I beg you.

THIRD CHORISTER
Go? Stay? What do you want of us?

PHILOCTETES
My foot! My poor foot!
What shall I do with you in the time I have left?
(*to the Chorus*)
Strangers, stay. Stay a little longer.

FIRST CHORISTER
You do keep changing your mind.

PHILOCTETES
What mind? My foot runs my life. And pain.

SECOND CHORISTER
Unhappy man. Come with us. It's better.

PHILOCTETES
Never. That way is worse. May they all die
there beneath the high walls of Troy
who had the heartlessness to abandon me.
I ask of you that you grant me one request.

THIRD CHORISTER
And what is that?

PHILOCTETES

Give me a sword. Or an axe.
Or even an arrow.

FIRST CHORISTER

For what possible purpose?

PHILOCTETES

To put them to their proper use—to kill.
What I want now is to get it over with.

SECOND CHORISTER

Why?

PHILOCTETES

I want to visit my father.

SECOND CHORISTER

Where?

PHILOCTETES

Where he is. In Hades. He is no longer
here in the world of light. I shall be sorry to miss
seeing my city again and its sacred stream
that I left to follow the Greeks. A rash decision.

(*Exit Philoctetes into the cave.*)

THIRD CHORISTER

We've waited here too long, I fear.

FIRST CHORISTER

Look there,
Odysseus is coming and Neoptolemus with him.

(*Enter Odysseus and Neoptolemus.*)

ODYSSEUS
Will you explain to me why you are rushing back here?

NEOPTOLEMUS
To put right a wrong I did before.

ODYSSEUS
What you say is offensive. You did nothing wrong.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Obeying you and the army . . . that was wrong.

ODYSSEUS
You did what was necessary and proper.

NEOPTOLEMUS
No, I overcame a hurt man
with trickery and deceit.

ODYSSEUS
Oh, for gods' sake!
What surprise are you contemplating now?

NEOPTOLEMUS
It's not a surprise. It's what I owe the man.

ODYSSEUS
This doesn't bode well. What are you doing?

NEOPTOLEMUS
I took the bow from him . . .

ODYSSEUS

And now you're giving it back?
That's what we came here for! Don't you remember?

NEOPTOLEMUS

The way in which I acquired it was shameful.

ODYSSEUS

You're saying this to tease me? Or annoy me?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Neither one. I'm simply telling the truth.

ODYSSEUS

What utter nonsense! What are you saying?

NEOPTOLEMUS

Do you want me to say it again?

ODYSSEUS

Once was too much.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I think you understand me clearly enough.

ODYSSEUS

I'm afraid I do, but it won't be quite that simple.

NEOPTOLEMUS

What do you mean? What is going to stop me?

ODYSSEUS

The Achaeans will. Specifically, I will.

NEOPTOLEMUS
You're supposed to be clever rather than blunt.

ODYSSEUS
What you are saying isn't clever at all.

NEOPTOLEMUS
It may not be clever, but even so it is right.

ODYSSEUS
How is it right to give back what we got,
carrying out my plan?

NEOPTOLEMUS
The plan was disgraceful.
It is that for which I now must make amends.

ODYSSEUS
Have you no fear of the whole Achaean army?

NEOPTOLEMUS
With right on my side, I fear nothing and no one.

ODYSSEUS
In human affairs, fear often gives good counsel.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Is that your opaque way of threatening force?

ODYSSEUS
Not so opaque, I think. We fight the Trojans
but should the occasion arise we could fight with you.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Let what will come come. I will not be deterred.

ODYSSEUS
You see that my right hand is clasping my sword hilt.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Is that supposed to scare me into submission?

(*Odysseus menaces Neoptolemus for a moment but then lets go of the sword.*)

ODYSSEUS
Do what you want. I shall report to the army
and they will decide what should be done with you.

NEOPTOLEMUS
A prudent decision. Continue to show such sense
watching your step and you may live through the war.
(*Exit Odysseus.*)
Philoctetes! Come out! Show your face!

(*Enter Philoctetes.*)

PHILOCTETES
What is all this shouting? Who is it? Why
do you call me out of my cave? Is it something bad?

NEOPTOLEMUS
Do not be afraid. I bring you a message. Listen.

PHILOCTETES.
It's you. I am afraid. Last time your words
were fair and friendly but I still came to grief.

NEOPTOLEMUS
I came to say that I'm sorry.

PHILOCTETES
What good does that do?
Last time you were friendly but then you stole my bow.

NEOPTOLEMUS
I did wrong. I am here one last time to ask
whether you wish to stay here or to come with us.

PHILOCTETES
Stop. There is no point in going on.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Is that your decision then?

PHILOCTETES
Then, now,
and into the distant future.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Again, I'm sorry.
I wish I could change your mind. But if I cannot,
then I must stand here in silence.

PHILOCTETES
Silence is better
than lies and dissimulation. I listened once,
but you may as well be silent now for I
will turn a deaf ear to what you have to say,
you vile son of a most noble father.
A plague on you and on Atreus' sons and a worse
plague on the son of Laertes whom I despise!

NEOPTOLEMUS
Enough prayers and curses. In silence, receive
the weapon I took from you that you need to survive.

PHILOCTETES
You play another trick on me boy? You joke?

NEOPTOLEMUS
No, it is no joke. I swear by Zeus.

PHILOCTETES
If only your words were true . . .

NEOPTOLEMUS
Put out your hand
and I shall return to you the weapon I took.

(*Enter Odysseus.*)

ODYSSEUS
Stop! I forbid it. It's a direct order.

PHILOCTETES
Who is that? Odysseus, I should imagine.

ODYSSEUS
Absolutely. I am here to carry you off
to Troy, whatever Achilles' son may think.

(*Philoctetes puts an arrow to the bow and aims it at Odysseus.*)

PHILOCTETES
Not if this arrow flies straight and true.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Don't shoot!
I beg you!

PHILOCTETES

Let go of my hand, young man.

NEOPTOLEMUS

No.

(*Exit Odysseus.*)

PHILOCTETES

Why did you prevent me from killing him?

NEOPTOLEMUS

It would not have been an honorable thing
for either of us.

PHILOCTETES

At least you have seen how
these Achaeans are brave enough with words
but show more caution when facing a real weapon.

NEOPTOLEMUS

So, now you have the bow. And no cause for anger
with me.

PHILOCTETES

I agree with you. You have shown yourself
a worthy son of a noble father, famous
among the living as he must be with the dead.
But he, Odysseus, Sisyphus' wicked bastard . . .

NEOPTOLEMUS

I thank you for your praise of my father and me,
but I have a favor to ask. Men must endure
the miseries the gods have imposed upon them;
those whose griefs are self-inflicted may suffer
as much but it is hard to feel the same
pity for them. You have become a savage
and have, I think, forgotten how to listen
to sound advice spoken with good will.
From such counsel you not only turn away
but you dismiss the friend who is trying to help you.
Nevertheless, I will speak, and I swear by Zeus,
the guarantor of oaths, that I'm trying to help you.
It is true that you came by your wound at the hands of the gods
when you violated Chryse's sanctuary
where the viper was keeping watch. And you understand
that as long as the sun comes up in the east and sets
on the western horizon, you will never be healed
until you come of your own free will to Troy,
where Asclepius' sons can relieve your malady.
With this bow and with me, you will show yourself
as the conqueror of Troy. I know this is so,
having heard it from Helenus, the prophet,
who told us what is fated to happen this summer.
If he is proved wrong, he has given permission
for us to put him to death. Knowing all this,
give us your consent, come with us now,
be cured, and accept the glory you will have earned
as the best of Achaeans in this hateful war.

PHILOCTETES

O wretched life, why do you clutch me still
and keep me above the ground to endure these blows?
Let me go off to Hades, a shade among shadows.

I cannot doubt the words of my friend here,
but I do not wish to give in and admit I was wrong.
Who among men will respect me? Who will believe
a word I say? The sons of Atreus left me
here to die. How can I now rejoin them
as if nothing had ever happened? How
can I sail in Odysseus' company? The pain
of the past is past. The pain of humiliation
looms ahead. Evil deeds beget
more evil. Consider your own case
and think of what they have made you do! How can you
go with them to Troy? Of your father's armor
that ought to have been yours these villains robbed you.
After that, will you fight on their side?
Will you urge me to do the same? Never, never!
Keep the oath you swore to me. Take me home
and stay with me in Skyros. Let the Achaeans
perish, every one of them. They are wicked
and in a just world would never deserve
to triumph over the Trojans or anyone else.
Let us not help them but remain aloof,
each and both holding on to our honor.

NEOPTOLEMUS
There is logic to what you say but even so
I urge you to put your trust in the gods. Trust me.
Leave this island and sail with me to Troy.

PHILOCTETES
To Troy, with my wounded foot and my wounded heart?

NEOPTOLEMUS
To those who will cure your foot, ease your pain,
and rescue you from this lonely island existence.

PHILOCTETES
You give advice that is difficult to take.

NEOPTOLEMUS
It is the only way to improve your lot.

PHILOCTETES
But have you no shame before the gods and men?

NEOPTOLEMUS
What shame is there in giving help to a friend?

PHILOCTETES
Are you giving help to Atreus' sons or to me?

NEOPTOLEMUS
To you. You are my friend.

PHILOCTETES
And how is that,
if you mean to turn me over to those I hate?

NEOPTOLEMUS
From all your suffering, you have become self-righteous.

PHILOCTETES
Your friendly advice is going to be my ruin.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Not at all. You haven't thought it through.

PHILOCTETES
What I'm sure of is that the sons of Atreus
left me alone on this island.

NEOPTOLEMUS

Yes, they did,
but now you can let them save you. Think about that.

PHILOCTETES

No. Not if I have to join them at Troy.

NEOPTOLEMUS

I don't know what else I can say. The time for talking
is over. I must leave. Do you want to stay here
living as you have been living for all these years?

PHILOCTETES

Let me suffer what is my fate to suffer.
But do what you swore to do, clasping my hand.
Take me home. Never mind about Troy.

NEOPTOLEMUS (*after a pause*)

All right. I will. Let us depart.

PHILOCTETES

Splendid!
A noble boy.

NEOPTOLEMUS

If you can, follow in my footsteps.

PHILOCTETES

I think I can manage if you don't go too fast.

NEOPTOLEMUS

How shall I escape the Achaeans' anger?

PHILOCTETES
Don't think about it.

NEOPTOLEMUS
What if they raid my city?

PHILOCTETES
I will be there.

NEOPTOLEMUS
And what can you do to help?

PHILOCTETES
Remember, I have the arrows of Heracles.

NEOPTOLEMUS
And what does that mean?

PHILOCTETES
Having those arrows,
I can defend your city and keep it safe.

NEOPTOLEMUS
Very well. Let us leave. Will you kiss the ground
and bid the island farewell as you've longed to do?

(*Heracles appears above the stage.*)

HERACLES
Wait, son of Poas. Look at me
and hear me, Heracles, having left my home
in heaven to tell you of Zeus's plan and dissuade you
from the voyage on which you now plan to embark.
Listen, Philoctetes! You know of my labors

and what I endured to achieve eternal glory.
For you, too, a similar glory is waiting.
With this man you shall go to Troy and there
be cured of your foul sickness. You shall be judged
the best of the Achaeans because of your valor.
You shall bring down Paris who was the cause
of all these troubles. You shall conquer Troy.
You shall take the pick of the spoils to your father
and bring them to the high plateau of Oeta.
These spoils you must sacrifice for me
and the mighty bow. And on you, son of Achilles,
I lay the same command. You cannot prevail
alone over Troy but you will need his help
as he will need yours. Therefore, guard each other
as two companion lions do in the wild.
I will send Asclepius to Troy
to put an end to your pain. My bow will bring down
Ilium's pride. But always remember the gods
and show them proper reverence, for all things come
from the mind of Zeus. Mortals die, but their reverence
lives on, as immortal as gods themselves.

PHILOCTETES
You have come to express what was in my soul. I promise
I shall not disobey your clear instructions.

NEOPTOLEMUS
I, too, will obey and I give my thanks.

HERACLES
Do not delay. The moment for sailing is here,
and the wind is at the stern to speed your way.

PHILOCTETES

As I depart, I bid farewell to the island
and the nymphs of the shore, I say a last goodbye.
I remember the sound of the waves that broke on the shore
and how in my cave the wind would drench my head,
and I groaned as the storm attacked and thought I heard
an answering groan from the mountains. All that's past.
Spring with your sweet water, I offer thanks
for I leave now, as I never dared hope I would.
Lemnos, goodbye, and wish me a peaceful voyage.
But wherever Fate may take me, I cannot complain.
I trust in my friends and the always-victorious gods
to whose dictates we all must learn to accede.

FIRST CHORISTER

Let us go, with a prayer to the sea nymphs
that they may protect us and bring us safely home.